



♪ 杉井 光

さよならピアノソナタ4

イラスト ♪ 植田 亮



As the season changed, the distance between me and Mafuyu grew closer bit by bit.

Our feelings were within reachable distance with our outstretched hands.

I knew, thanks to our body warmth. And also the pulsations and our breathes.

I wanted to convey to her,
my feelings that I could not put into words.

SAYONARA PIANO SONATA 4



さよならビターノナタ4

♪杉井光 イラスト♪植田亮



神楽坂

Kyouko
Kagurazaka

響子

"With this, the friendship and trust
that we once had between us —
our normal friendship will burn
and disappear into nothingness.
It's a shame, but it can't be helped."



"How can I possibly return you
the content? That's my treasure, you know!?
You should at least understand that much,
you idiot!"

相原
千晶

Chiaki
Aihara

桧川直巳

Naomi
Hikawa

"Well then, did you find it?

Your real desire."

The heartfelt desire.

".....I don't know."

"I've already found mine."

蛸沢真冬

Maoyu
Ebisawa

However, our thoughts did not take shape.
Instead, they fluttered downwards slowly and piled up on the soil,
accumulating deeply and coldly in whiteness.

Winter is coming.

Our final winter is approaching—




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Chapter 1

The Way to Sing, The Way to Open the Door

That winter was the very first time in my life when I wrecked my brain over what present I should get for a girl.

It was morning in the practice room of the Folks Music Club. Due to the drum set and the amplifiers, there was barely any space left in the room even though only Chiaki and I were in it. The air outside was chilling to the bones, but it was really warm inside of here.

The other two girls should be here soon, right? — I thought to myself as I stared at the bundled short hair swaying between the cymbals. There was no way I could ask Mafuyu, whom I will be giving the present to, for ideas. Also, I had no intention of consulting Senpai since it would definitely pique her interest.

However, when I had finally decided to discuss it with Chiaki, she asked me this question instead: "Haa? Present?". She then threw a punch in my direction.

"What was that for....."

I rubbed my head gingerly as I picked up the fallen bass.

"What's the present for? Come on, say it again."





Asked Chiaki as she puffed at her fist. Who would have the guts to answer you? However, I was forced to answer in stutters as Chiaki's gaze was becoming sharper and sharper.

"Well, as I was saying, Mafuyu's birthday's coming soon....."

Another blow. Just as I had expected.

"Unbelievable! You shouldn't be approaching me for that if there's even an ounce of sensitivity in you!"

"Eh? But..... I mean, I do know Chiaki's preferences are vastly different from Mafuyu's, but I have no idea who else I can approach."

"That's not what I meant!"

The third blow. I was getting dizzy already. Chiaki gave a "hmmph" and began to tune the snare drum. I gave a sigh and plugged my bass into the amplifiers. What was going on here? Did I say something to piss her off?

"Geez! Nao, stop thinking of all those pointless stuff and begin our practice! Time is precious, you know?"

"I get it....." Guess I'll leave the issue about the present for later. It was rare for Chiaki to come to school together with me early.

I placed the strap on my shoulder and gripped tightly the neck of the bass. The remnants of the heat from back then still lingered on the strings. I could even feel the sweat that flowed out from my fingertips before being absorbed by my palms.





It has been a week since the storm-like school festival. We were in the winter season now, so that made it hard for us to wake up early, but that did not stop me from doing the morning practice. That was because I realized how poor my physical endurance was during the live performance.

I barely made it past the two-hour long non-stop performances that was held for two consecutive days. I had already braced myself for it, but I guess that strange incident made my emotions run high all the time, and my body moved against my own will as though it was under the influence of some strange drug. However, after we were finished with the encore on the second day and my brain was drained of the drug, the student council came barging onto the backstage and said to Senpai.

"Kagurazaka, there's a whole lot of people outside who wanted to watch your performance but couldn't get in. Can you guys hold another performance during the kouyasai?" [TLNote: Kouyasai (後夜祭) is the event held at night on the last day of a festival, usually involving dancing near/around bonfires and other events]

Senpai agreed to it readily. Can you try imagining just how tragic that was when the wax of the candle was all burned up, and all that remained was the candle wick flickering faintly?

"Right, Nao's back looked really pitiful during the kouyasai." Seems like Chiaki remembered as well. And as she tuned the bass drum, she continued, "But Senpai was really happy though. She said you sounded like Springsteen."

"Though I changed into Mori Shinichi later on....." [TLNote: [A famous enka singer](#)]

"All the more reason for you to practice!"





Looks like Chiaki was still angry about the issue of the present. She stepped repeatedly on the pedals of the bass drum, and the bass notes gradually gained rhythm and transformed into a solid sixteen beat tempo as it interwove together with the beats of the floor tom. The door was still opened for air ventilation, you know..... oh well, she was restraining herself on the volume anyway.

I sighed to myself silently — it was incredibly difficult to drum continuously while keeping the volume down. She was getting more and more impressive. I had the feeling that I was left behind.

"Nao's singing sounded a little forced. Perhaps it's because you're playing the bass at the same time. It used to be much more straight-forward."

"That's some memory of yours....." She even remembered how I used to sing?

"How long do you think I've taken music lessons together with you?"

"You're right."

Chiaki and I have been classmates for the past ten years. Quite unbelievable, come to think of it. And ten years later, we even joined the same band.

"That's why you have to practice more to get your fingers accustomed to it. Your singing should become more natural once that happens."





I see. Come to think of it, she was actually drumming and chatting at the same time. Was that also because her hands were used to it after repeated practicing?

"Urm, where should I begin our practice? Which phrase?"

"How should I know? Don't depend on me for things like that!"

She was right. I regretted it the moment I asked her that question. Chiaki puffed up her cheeks, and all these while her limbs did not stop their tasks of sketching out the tempo.

"Even if it's me, there's no way I'll know every single thing about Nao."

"Then how much do you know?"

I almost fell forward at the sudden voice from behind my back. When I turned around, my nose almost came into contact with the maroon colored hair — a pair of sapphire eyes appeared right before me. I froze on the spot as I stared intently at Mafuyu's face. Her nose and cheeks were slightly red, probably because she was walking to school in the cold winter air of the morning. When did she reach here? I never noticed her presence because of the continuous beats from the drums. Chiaki did not see her as well as her sight was blocked by my body — she stopped her hands with a surprised expression.

"Geez, give us a greeting if you're here already! Morning, Mafu-Mafu!" exclaimed Chiaki as she lifted the drum sticks into the air.

"..... Morning," Mafuyu shifted her gaze away from me in embarrassment. It was the same for me as well — my heart was pounding just from a brief exchange of sight.





That was because — it has only been a week since our live performance at the school festival.

"It's not a good habit to eavesdrop," came the voice of Chiaki.

"I was not!" Mafuyu shook her head hard, her hair dancing about in the air. "..... It was by accident!"

"H-How much of our conversation did you hear?" I was panicking. Did she hear about the present as well? Mafuyu frowned.

"..... Is there something you want to hide from me?"

"Eh? Ah, no, well....."

"I heard you and Chiaki talking about how you two have been attending music lessons together for years."

Thank goodness. So she heard our conversation only from then onwards.

"Why are you heaving a sigh of relief?"

Mafuyu's question caused my mind to go into panic mode once more. Why was she angry as well?

"Urm, what?"

"You're always like this, Nao. Your thoughts will be reflected clearly on your face," came Chiaki's voice from behind me.

"I-Is that true?"





"You never noticed?"

Mafuyu dealt me a heavy blow when she said that. Chiaki gave a shrug.

"How can he possibly notice it? He's so dense, he would not even realize it if he is stung by a bee."

"That much I know."

"Even the amoebas possess more nerves than he does."

"That I know too."

What the hell did I do!?

"Earlier on, he even asked me about Mafuyu's pre-" "Whoaaa!" I stepped over the drums and clamped my hands on Chiaki's mouth. Please don't say that out loud!

"Uhhuhhhh!"

"What? Is there something that I must not know?"

When I turned around, Mafuyu was putting on an expression as if she was interrogating me. Being forced into a corner with nowhere to run, the only thing I could do was to flap my arms about like a dying moth as I tried to come up with something that could satisfy her.

"Morning, my fellow comrades!"

Came a booming voice, and a tall silhouette appeared in the opened door. Kagurazaka-senpai strode leisurely into the practice





room as her braided black hair fluttered in the air. She then closed the heavy door. I was saved. She might not know what was happening around here, but I was in a really bad situation.

"Hmm? Young man's about to kiss Comrade Aihara, so Comrade Ebisawa's trying to stop him?"

"No way!" "Not at all!" "Kyouko!"

Senpai removed her guitar case from her shoulder and placed it onto the floor. She then opened the door with a smile.

"In order not to interrupt you three, I'll leave the camcorder running and stay outside for about five minutes. Please continue."

"Hold on, hold on! What the heck are you here for? Let's begin our morning practice! You know, the morning practice!?"

I tried my hardest to make her stay.

"You need to practice kissing in the morning? I never expect you to be such an innocent guy. I see, I am willing to help you out."

"Why is Senpai thinking in that direction!? We are a band, are we not!?"

Senpai turned around, closed the door and lifted her index finger.

"We are no ordinary band, yeah? We are the black birds <feketerigó>, burning through the night with the flames of love, and ours wings will declare to the world the advent of dawn."

"Okay....." And so?





"If we ever get popular one day, and should someone request us to take part in a movie shoot, wouldn't it be problematic if we can't get the kissing scene right?"

"Why are you worrying about such pointless things?"

"On the side note, Comrade Ebisawa's pretty impressive when it comes to kissing," Senpai licked her lips.

"Kyouko~!" Mafuyu shrieked and slammed her fists hard onto the cymbals by her side. I was surprised by that. W-When did that happen!? Ah, no wait, could she be talking about what happened on the third day of our training camp?

"Geez! Music's our main focus!" Chiaki poked Senpai with the tip of the drum stick. "We should direct our attention to holding more live performances in order to get ourselves famous!"

"The reason why I love Comrade Aihara so much is because you'll always say the right things at the most crucial moment!"

"That trick of yours will only work twice a month at most!"

"How about if I throw in a hug and a kiss?"

"Hmm..... make it three times then."

What was with that conversation? Senpai walked past me with a smile and opened up the guitar case. The Les Paul was giving off a black luster.

"I am happy to see that everyone's flame is still burning. I thought young man was already burned to a crisp, and it would take you a





while before you recover. Looks like you've steeled your heart already."

Senpai flashed a smile as she tightened the strings in a sultry manner.

"You will show me an unknown world in our next performance, and the many ones after that. Right?"

"We've already decided on our next performance?"

Asked Mafuyu as she swung her head around quickly. That was way beyond what I had expected. It looked like she was getting more and more into the live performances.

"No, not yet. I want to hold one more performance before the end of the year, but I wish to aim further. I have no intention of staying on the same spot."

"An even bigger stage?" asked Chiaki.

"That's right. At a place where we will receive no support from our audience."

Kagurazaka-senpai was someone who would not remain on the same spot forever. She was always aiming further and further. How far has she set her sights on? And can I really keep up to her pace?

"No worries."

Smiled Senpai as she took a brief glimpse at the small country which we are in.





"Even if we are stuck, we should be able to move forward as long as our hearts continue to beat in rhythm. Just like what young man did for Comrade Ebisawa back then."

The sound of a clatter came from behind me. I turned around and saw Mafuyu picking up the fallen chairs and amplifiers. She stole a glance at me, but her face turned even redder instead, so she moved her gaze away instead. I quickly turned my head towards my bass's amplifiers.

I played quite a few notes wrongly during that morning practice, and it was all because I noticed Mafuyu staring at me hesitantly through the corner of my eyes. Needless to say, my singing did not sound natural at all.

I could not shake off Mafuyu's gaze away from my mind even during class.

Ever since that incident—

The distance between us has shrunk.

I had no idea how much it was. But I was scared — scared that it was all just my wishful thinking. After the ending of the kouyasai, Mafuyu collapsed from exhaustion while she was packing things up, so I carried her to the infirmary. As there was no one around in the infirmary, I was left with no choice but to look after her (though all I did was to sit on the chair next to the bed). That hour was a great opportunity for me, but I screwed it up by chatting with her on music only. What the hell was I doing?





"That's right. What the hell were you doing, Nao?"

"You should have made a move on her back then! We thought you two would return hand in hand. What a huge disappointment that was."

The guys in my class surrounded me and blasted me with their insults. That happened in the changing room after the we were done with physical education, the fourth lesson of the day.

"Urm, sorry....." No wait, why was I apologizing?

"But you should have done something there, right?" "It's impossible for nothing to happen, right?"

"Urm..... Ah, right. Mafuyu hates Italian operas, just like I do."

"Who the hell is asking you that?" "Just be a music critic for the rest of your life!" "Damn it, is that thing between your legs a dud?"

Why was I scolded by everyone I met today? I really felt like crying.

"Nothing else? Like a date or something?"

"Urm....."

My classmates were closing in on me like a pack of hungry wolves ready to pounce on a sheep. I finally revealed to them my intention of celebrating Mafuyu's birthday with her. In an instant, the eyes of everyone flared up like the pumpkins of Halloween. Whoa!

"What are you getting her, Nao?"

Why must I answer that question?





"I-I-It should be a ring first, right?" "That's way too fast, calm down! He should gift her a choker as his first present." "You should be the one who's calming down!" "How many months of salary do you have to burn to buy a choker?" "Not for the Princess, silly. It's for Nao!" "That's a good one!"

"No, well..... Sorry to interrupt while you guys are having such a passionate discussion on the matter..... but I have not made up my mind yet."

"Just die already, you indecisive bastard!" "It better end up in a tragedy!"

I shrunk my body and leaned myself in closely against the lockers. I want to hide somewhere. Please do not talk about this matter anymore. I had no idea why the guys were lashing out on me — for some reason unknown to me, everyone has assumed that Mafuyu and I were in that sort of relationship already. When did I ever say that?

"It's less than two weeks before her birthday, isn't that so? You better make up your mind quickly, Nao."

"Mmm..... wait, why do you guys know about her birthday?"

"Are you an idiot!? It's obvious we'll do some checking up on the birthday of a girl who is in the limelight!"

"The high-school's a long period of time. You never know what will happen."

"Though it has all happened to Nao."





"Damn it, I'm pissed. You should just die, Nao." It was not my fault!

"You can't even decide on a gift even with all the girls surrounding you."

"Mmm. I tried discussing it with Chiaki, but she rejected me."

I could sense the fury in everyone.

"You tried discussing with Aihara?" "About Princess' present?" "Are you for real?"

I shivered and nodded. In the next moment, I was beaten onto the floor. "This is for Aihara! And this is for me!" said one of the guys as he punched me twice on my stomach. The rest of the guys followed suit.

The dust danced in the air mixed with the smell of sweat and deodorant — I was left alone in the room, my body immobile from the pain I had suffered due to all the injuries on my body. The only thing I could do was to lie on my back and listen to the bell which signaled the end of lunch break, ringing from a place faraway.

Human beings are creatures who will reflect on what they've done wrong — so on that very night, I spent my time in my room thinking about the reason behind Chiaki and the guys' anger. We've been hanging around with each other for over ten years already, but I did not really know her very well. And that was even more true ever since we joined the band. I mean, we do know each other quite well if we were talking about the typical things. Take for example our birthdays.





Hmm. Birthday. Was that it? It was highly possible that she was angry because of that. Right, I'll get a present that is suitable for her then. Will that be okay? I wonder how late I am? I checked the calender on the desk and counted.

Urm..... it was way too late.

But I guess it was still better than nothing. Yup.

My mind was circling around the same thought for heaven knows how long.

After making up my mind, I walked quietly downstairs. Coming from the living room was Bach's Christmas Oratorio with Tetsurou listening to it in full blast. I sneaked carefully past the corridor and opened up the cabinet to draw out a record that was kept within it. I then wrapped it up with a blue wrapping paper from the department store.

Will she be happy with this? — I thought to myself naively. Come to think of it, I was really hopeless back then.

The next day, I saw Chiaki on the platform while I was waiting for the very first train, so I ran over to hand her the present. Chiaki's eyes opened wide when she received the present from me, her gaze wandering to-and-fro me and the present for about four times. She then asked,

"What's this?"

"Urm, I'm ten months early, but it's your birthday present."

"Haa?"





"This is the vinyl record of <Sgt.Peppers>, the UK version. You've been wanting this for a very long time already, isn't that so?"

"Eh? W-W-Why? And typically speaking, shouldn't you say that it's two months late?"

Chiaki's face alternated between red and white; her eyes widened for a brief moment, and then she blinked them repeatedly for a while. What a busy person she was.

"Why? You've never given me any birthday present."

"Were you not angry yesterday because of this?"

Her beet red face froze for a moment. And the next moment—

"You moron—!"

The scenery before my eyes flipped at the very same time I heard her furious roar. A violent impact greeted my back before I could even figure out what was going on.

The unbelievably blue winter sky appeared before my eyes, though half of it was covered up by the shelter of the train station. Pain shot through my head, my back was arcing upwards from the spasm. Just as I realized that I was tossed over by Chiaki, she popped her head over me.

"U-Unbelievable! I never expected you to be as stupid as this!"

In response to Chiaki's stomping attacks, I shielded my head with my arms and rolled about on the floor.





"S-Sorry. Urm, I never expect you to be that angry."

It looked like I had made a critical mistake. It took me a great deal of effort to finally get up. Chiaki was hugging the record tightly before her chest, staring at me fiercely as her shoulders heaved up and down to her breaths. Thank the heavens that there was no one else on the platform in the wee hours, or else it would be bad should anyone witness the scene earlier on.

"Moreover, you should know that the gramophone in my house is broken."

Come to think of it, it was just as she had said. I had visited her house several times to play, but I forgot all about it already.

"I'm sorry, I'll take it back....."

"Idiot!"

Chiaki slapped my hand away and hid the record behind her.

"I'm keeping this since you're giving it to me!" So do you want it or not? What on earth do you want?

Just then, the first train arrived in the station, so I quickly stepped back behind the white line. The back of my head was assaulted by the blaring sirens.

"You should think about my feelings as well!"

Yelled Chiaki with a voice comparable to the sound of the train, her face flushed red. The bunch of hair that she had tied up was flapping against her ears due to the wind. I did not step onto the





train when the door opened as she was giving off an overbearing aura around her.

"Stupid Nao, you should just die!"

Chiaki's voice was cut off by the closing doors of the train. I could see the silhouette of her body through the windows, and it was getting further and further away from me. But I caught a glimpse of a glitter at the corner of her eyes.

Was she crying?

I squatted on the platform and tried my hardest to recall her voice and expressions until the next train arrived.

The frequency of the trains was very low. If I missed the first train, I would be twenty minutes late for school.

As the main gates were closed already, I entered the school through a side door instead. It would be awkward when I bump into Chiaki — just as I turned past a corner of the building while thinking of that, I heard a faint drumming sound.

It was the old, low-rise music block, huddled amid the shadows of the tall school buildings. There was a person squatting against the door of the room that was located furthest away between the buildings, her long maroon hair almost brushing against the ground. It was Mafuyu. What was she doing there?

"..... Morning."





Mafuyu greeted me softly by lifting her eyes to look at me. She hugged the guitar in her bosom.

"Morning....."

I stopped at about three steps away from Mafuyu. Why was she waiting outside? Wasn't Chiaki in there? We turned our sight away right after we came into eye contact with each another. It has been the case ever since the school festival.

Was there something that you should be telling me?

Feels like Mafuyu was conveying that message to me from the corner of her eyes, but neither of us could touch upon that matter. It was the same for that morning as well. Instead, what I said to her was an ordinary question,

"Urm..... Chiaki should be inside, so why are you here?"

Mafuyu stared at me intently and heaved a deliberate sigh. A stinging sense of guilt and sadness was jammed up in my throat. She lowered her head and allowed her words to fall between her knees.

"Chiaki's angry, so I am waiting for her to cool down."

"S-She's angry? Did she say anything to you?"

Mafuyu shook her head.

"It's obvious from the sounds. The strength in the upbeat had disappeared. It will turn into this sort of uninteresting tempo whenever Chiaki's angry or anxious."





I was speechless. Can she tell that much just from the sounds of the drums alone?

"You never noticed? You are really dense....."

Mafuyu was giving off a look of resignation in my direction. Okay, I am dense, but that is another thing altogether, okay?

"Something happened? You were acting strangely yesterday as well."

Mafuyu stood up slowly and pulled her face towards mine.

"No, nothing. Urm....."

Chiaki's anger began when I wanted to discuss with her Mafuyu's birthday present, so it should be more or less related to Mafuyu as well, isn't it? But now's not the time for me to say it.

"Explain it to me properly."

"Urm, you see, uhh....."

"Why are you always like this?"

Mafuyu's voice and gaze stabbed their way deeply and painfully into my heart.

"If you do not say it properly..... I..... I am....." Mafuyu's furious voice was getting softer and softer, her gaze was sliding downwards along my body, "..... still waiting for you."

Waiting for me? Waiting for what?





No, of course she was waiting for my words. B-But I was not mentally prepared yet, and neither was I ready with the present, so now was not—

"Forget it. I get it." Mafuyu lifted her lowered head all of the sudden. "I'll ask Chiaki."

"Y-You can't!"

I was surprised even by my own voice. Mafuyu was shocked as well. She pressed her back against the door.

"Urm, I mean, well, urm, I made Chiaki angry..... probably. So I'll think of something and apologize to her."

That was right, it had to be me who spoke. It was the same for Mafuyu's present as well. All in all, asking for Chiaki's assistance was a mistake. It should be me to think about it and decide everything by myself.

And so, I pulled Mafuyu aside and grabbed onto the handle of the door.

"Nao! You are so freaking late! I've said this before, it would be faster if you run to school should you miss the first train, didn't I!?"

A furious roar came pouncing onto me the moment I opened the door. Thank goodness, it was the usual Chiaki — I heaved a sigh of relief for some unknown reason. That was really shameful of me.





Chapter 2

Fingers, Jeff Beck, Theme Park

"And so, how are things going on between you and Mafuyu right now?"

Yuri raised his voice in an attempt to make himself heard amid the noise of the crowded livehouse. It was pretty noisy here despite the fact that we were in the middle of a break — the heated discussions among the audience and the tuning of the stereo systems were all contributors to the noise.

"Lots of things happened during the live performance at the school festival, isn't that so?"

Sitting opposite of me was a young girl with blonde hair and blue eyes..... or not — he was actually a young male violinist. He stretched his body towards me and pulled his face closer to mine. A turtle-neck sweater paired with a matching red short-coat, plus a pair of denim shorts and over-knees socks. Mmm, that attire was perfectly fine for a guy..... no wait, that wasn't it, yeah? I pressed my palm against my forehead and sighed. I then asked,

"Look, why are you here, Yuri?"

There was a really interesting performance Sunday afternoon, so I came down to the livehouse <Bright> by myself. And then I bumped into this guy here.





"Shouldn't you be busy with the recordings and rehearsals? Your performance is coming up soon."

"Do you hate to see me?"

Quit holding onto my hands tightly and looking at me with those tearing eyes of yours when you're asking me that question, okay? It was really attention grabbing. Shit, this will invite misunderstandings.

"H-How can that be? I'm really glad to meet you."

Yuri's face brightened up in an instant.

"Thank goodness, I really wanted to see Naomi again as well. Tomo mailed me saying there would be Naomi's favorite live performance happening today, so there was a high chance of you showing up here."

DJ Tomo? Since when did they get on such good terms?

"I blame it all on Naomi. You refuse to call me because you and Mafuyu are doing very well together."

"N-No, e-eh?" How much does he know?

"I've heard lots of stuff from Mafuyu, but I'm not telling you what I heard."

Oh right, this guy here will be doing his next album together with Mafuyu, so he might actually be spending more time with her than I was. Though it was unexpected of Mafuyu to say all those things to Yuri.





"It's not like things are all smooth-sailing."

"But both of you confessed to each other already, did you not?"

"N-No?" Both of us?

"You never asked Mafuyu about her feelings?"

"Mmm....."

Yuri was rendered speechless for a long while.

But that was really the case.

I came into contact with Mafuyu's heart briefly during the school festival. I had a feeling she was staying by my side with the exact same reasons as I was, but that was all there was to it. We would be tongue-tied whenever we would see each other's face.

"Look, Naomi. I really hope you can understand how painful it is for me whenever I hear Mafuyu talking about you happily."

"H-Hmm?" Happily? That Mafuyu?

"I'll steal her away from you if you do not become decisive any time soon, you know?"

Yuri rested his elbows on the table and pulled his face even closer towards mine. My head was in a fluster when he said that with that tiny mouth of his at such a close distance away from me, so I backed away subconsciously.





Even if you ask me to be decisive..... (come to think of it, what was he referring to?) I have no idea what Mafuyu's answer would be, so I dared not pop the question.

Yuri slumped onto the table all of a sudden and began kicking his legs about. He seemed frustrated.

"..... What's wrong with you?"

"I'm about to die, all thanks to Naomi's indecisiveness."

So you could kill someone with your indecisiveness — now that was something new. Just as I was thinking that, Yuri sat up suddenly and pressed both of his hands on my shoulders.

"Actually, it's really simple. All you have to do is this."

W-What?

"I love you. I want Naomi's everything."

"Who the hell can say that? I'm not French!"

Wait, did he just say Naomi? Was it just a mistake on my part?

"Most of the Japanese are braver than Naomi!"

"What are you two doing here?"

A voice came from behind us suddenly. I turned around and saw a stout silhouette with a green baseball cap on his head and a beaten-up leather coat hanging from his shoulders. It was DJ Tomo.





"I never expect Yuri and Nao to be here. You two get along really well."

What was even more surprising was the person who appeared behind Tomo. It was a guy wearing a fierce expression, his long hair covered up by a bandanna — the guitarist Furukawa Taisei. Both of them were Kagurazaka-senpai's friends, and also regulars of <Bright>. So they actually knew each other too — what a small world this was.

"Tomo!" Yuri jumped off from his seat and hugged the tanned DJ. "Thank you for the ticket!"

"No biggie, I ask for nothing in return. Well, aside from you spending a night with me." You do know Yuri's gender, don't you?

"So you're here as well."

Said Furukawa as he sat down next to me and clamped the guitar that was originally on his back between his knees.

"Are you performing later, Furukawa?" I asked timidly. He was not here as audience, was he? I am really not good with dealing with him. You're asking me to watch the performance together with him? Please spare me from that.

"They asked me to support the six-o'clock performance." I heaved a sigh of relief when I heard the answer from Furukawa.

"Taisei knows Nao too?" Tomo sat next to Yuri.

"I told you already, didn't I? I performed with Kyouko's band."

Furukawa's temper was short, as usual.





"Who's she? Is she replacing you as the bassist?"

Yuri tilted his head in response when Furukawa pointed at him. Furukawa would ask me to quit the role as feketerigó's bassist whenever we would meet.

"That girl looks to be a better player than you are, and she's much more striking visually."

"Do I look like a bassist?" Yuri's eyes were glittering.

"It's obvious from your fingers. You should be playing the guitar or the bass, yeah?"

Impressive. He knew just by looking at the fingers. But he did not realize Yuri's actual gender, right? Idiot. I retorted in my mind as a tiny sense of superiority crept in me.

"Me taking over Naomi's position? What a good idea. I've never thought of that."

"No no no, what are you talking about?" You'll be busy with your work, won't you?

"If you quit and get her into the band, I'll introduce you guys to a producer," said Furukawa. Hey, Yuri, why are you putting on such a gleeful expression?

"U-Urm, Furukawa, you've got it all wrong. This person here's a violinist, an old friend of Mafuyu's."

"I know how to play the guitar too! I can practice on the bass too if I want to."





Don't you interrupt, Yuri! Things will just get even more confusing!

"And since I'm the one who taught Mafuyu the guitar, our timbres should match each other really well."

Furukawa frowned.

"You? Taught that girl?"

Yuri nodded lightly as he cowered in his seat in fear. What was wrong, Furukawa? That look of yours is really scary.

"Who did you learn the guitar from?"

"No one..... Urm, I memorized it by watching the videos of Jeff Beck and stuff."

"It's best for you and that girl to re-learn the correct fingering techniques."

Said Furukawa as he pressed his fingertip against Yuri's nose. Yuri was rendered speechless from his shock. Tomo and I interrupted Furukawa at the same time.

"H-Hey, Taisei, what's wrong?"

"Is there anything wrong with Mafuyu's fingering techniques?"

"I should have said this before," Furukawa shot a fierce glance at me, "There will be no future to her style of playing. She's placing too much stress on her wrist."





Now that he has mentioned it, Furukawa did say something along that line after the end of the live concert.

"What d-do you mean by placing too much stress?" I pushed my elbows against the table and stretched my body over the table subconsciously. Mafuyu might be able to move her right hand already, but I was still worried.

"She's using her wrists forcibly to strum the strings at high speeds to compensate for the lack of strength in her fingers. It's surprising she managed to play through the whole performance like that."

"Eh? Ah, no, but, her fingers are movable already."

Oh? Furukawa lifted his eyebrow.

"Then it's none of my business..... it pisses me off whenever I see that silly fingering technique of hers. You should put some effort in learning before you teach others, yeah?" His fierce gaze was shifted from my body to Yuri. Yuri flinched and grabbed onto my arm in fear.

"Why don't you teach Yuri then?" joked Tomo.

"Do I look like I have the time to do that!?"

"Yuri's not in any band, right? How about performing together with me next time? Taisei and I will be forming a band for our next live performance, so are you interested in joining us on stage? You can get Taisei to teach you at the studio."

"Hey, Tomo, don't go about deciding things on your own for the sake of your desires!" Furukawa gave Tomo a hard kick beneath the table.





"But this person here's really talented in guitar. Taisei, you can teach him the correct guitar techniques, while I'll be in charge of teaching him the techniques in bed." I gave Tomo a kick as well.

"When's the next performance?" Hey, Yuri! You don't have to be that enthusiastic about it!

"Twenty-fourth the next month. The event is named <Snow Crash>. And since that's Christmas eve, we'll be holding it in a spacious place that can accommodate five-hundred people."

"Christmas huh....."

Yuri knitted his eyebrows.

"I will probably be attending a party somewhere, but I'll skip that since I'm not interested."

"The event will start at noon. We'll be left alone at night. You know, making use of the opportunity to get all intimate and stuff."

"Mmm, I see. But I don't think I'll have the time to make it down to the studio. Sorry."

"But of course! Don't take his words for real, man!" Furukawa snapped.

"What a pity. I've found a song which will make even Yuri burn. It's a Christmas song by a French composer. Urm, forgot his name. Ho-Hon—"

"Honegger?"





Said Yuri and I at the same time. We turned our heads to look at each other.

"Yeah, him."

A Christmas song. Then it was most likely <Une Cantate de Noël>, the last work of his. It was a very dramatic cantata, but barely known in Japan. I'm surprised he found that. Yuri's legs were swinging about beneath the table.

"Wow! I wanna listen!"

Honegger should be a well-known composer outside of Japan because of his music appearing in many movies. It looks like Tomo was hooked on classical music ever since I asked him to help me with the editing of the piano concerto and the violin concerto. Playing Honegger's piece on Christmas at a live house — now he got me interested as well.

"So you knew about Honegger as well, Naomi? That's impressive. I was really sad since I never have heard Mafuyu mentioned him. I thought he was not well known in Japan."

"It can't be helped. Mafuyu's interest lie in the works from East Germany."

But it was true that Honegger was not too well known in Japan.

"Isn't that nice? I never thought I'll get to listen to Honegger's works live here. I am really interested in listening to how the arrangements will be."

"It shouldn't be a problem for you if you attend the concert as an audience, yeah? I'll give you a ticket."





"Mmm, I'll try to free up my schedule....."

Yuri's really lucky, I thought to myself in envy.

A music concert on Christmas eve.

Isn't that just perfect?

No wait. Wouldn't that be too straightforward? I think my intentions would be clear for all to see. No wait, isn't that okay? I mean, that was what I have intended to do all this while, isn't it? What was there to be afraid of at a time like this?

Filtering out the noise from the livehouse, I sank deep into thought. I regained my senses only when I was slapped by someone on the cheeks.

"Naomi? What's wrong?"

Unknown to me, Yuri was next to me, his palms and that cute face of his appearing right before my eyes. I almost fell backwards and slipped off my chair. Eh? Strange? Where was Furukawa?

"Taisei's about to hit the stage, so he went in," Tomo put on an exasperated expression, "It's about time for me to move the instruments as well, so you two enjoy yourselves."

"Ah, h-hold on a second, Tomo."

I leapt off my chair and dashed towards the tall and tanned DJ. The baseball cap turned around.





"About the Christmas concert. Do you guys sell advance tickets? I'd like to buy two."

Tomo tilted his head.

"We do. Are you coming along with Yuri? I'll be charging you for the tickets."

"N-Nah, that's not it."

I could feel the Yuri's gaze on my face just as I was about to blurt out my intentions, and that caused me to fluster.

"I'll pay for two tickets. Not with Yuri, but with someone else."

"Ahh, I see. Another girl? Nao's a real flirt."

"I think so too. Naomi should practice some abstinence."

"Yuri, you'll not find any happiness if you're together with a guy as useless as him. You should get someone better."

"But you know, encounters are just like traffic accidents. Can't be helped, I have no one but myself to blame for bumping into a dummy like Naomi."

All I wanted to do is to buy two tickets, so why were they speaking about me like this? I felt like crying.

"Who will you invite? Mafuyu?"

Yuri pulled his face next to mine and whispered into my ears. I could not bring myself to look at him straight in the eyes, so I directed my gaze towards the stage and nodded. I'll give her





Honegger's record as her birthday present — I should be able to find one in Tetsurou's collection. And with that, I'll have an excuse to ask her out on Christmas eve. Though I was not sure if she'll agree to it.

Just then, Yuri stomped hard on my foot.

"What the heck are you doing!?"

"There is no need for you to make the huge revelation right to my face, do you? You should consider my feelings as well!"

"You are the one who wants me to decide as quickly as I can— Oww, it hurts!" He actually drilled his heel hard onto my foot!

"I did say it, yeah!" Yuri was throwing a tantrum like a child, "I never expect you to get a pair of tickets for a concert on Christmas eve! That's so unlike Naomi!"

"Well sorry for that! Then again, I'm not sure if she would be willing to attend it together with me....."

"How could she possibly decline you!?"

"I-Is that so?"

"The live concert will end at five, so you'll be going on a date after that? Are you planning to head down to Disneyland? God damn it, who's the girl? Can't be Kyouko, right?" asked Tomo.

"If it's me, I won't be interested in Disneyland. I'll head straight to the hotel instead," said Kagurazaka-senpai.

– Wait a second. Ehrrrrrrrrrrrr!?





A tall silhouette appeared behind Tomo's gigantic body suddenly. She was wearing a miniskirt despite it being the end of November (although it was a cashmere one), that revealed the curves of her legs generously. Her belly button could be seen faintly between the knitted jacket and the miniskirt. Kagurazaka-senpai did not braid her hair today. Instead, she allowed them to flow naturally behind her back — that made her look even more mature than usual.

"Sen..... pai? Why are you here?"

"Why? I'm here to attend the concert since Taisei and Tomo will be performing. What a coincidence. I would have invited you along should I know you'll be attending as well. Then again....."

Kagurazaka-senpai moved in towards me and hooked my arm with a sensual smile on her face. I could not run away despite the shock I was experiencing.

"This coincidence further confirms the invisible bonds we have between us. I'm really happy."

"Eh? H-Haa, no, wait."

My mind was in a mess. I could not even shake off Senpai's hand that she was using to caress me softly on my chin.

"You could have told me yesterday if you're coming down. I could have given you a lift here."

"Tomo's car is filled with musical instruments, isn't that so? I am not interested in getting squished by the sampler and the mixer while we're bumping along the idyllic trails."





"No worries, I've tidied up the boot recently so that I could make space at the co-driver's seat for Kyouko."

"And whenever Tomo drives past a hotel, you'd ask me things like 'Which do you prefer? A rest or a stay overnight?' and so on. That's sexual harassment, you know? I've already decided I'll be sitting only by the side of the one whom I love."

Senpai hugged me tightly by my arm as they carried on with their crazy conversation.

"No, but this guy here said not too long ago that he'll be spending Christmas eve with another girl—"

"Oh right. I hope you can be clear about this," Senpai placed her hands on my shoulders and turned me towards her.

"Urm, well."

Why does she want to know? Senpai burned my eyes with that passionate gaze from her slightly teary eyes. I had no option but to turn my head to seek assistance.

"..... Naomi's a real flirt."

Muttered Yuri as he hid closely behind me. What the heck!? Why are you saying that as well?

Just then, the force that was applied on my shoulders by Senpai's hand disappeared all of a sudden.

Senpai snapped her head, her eyes opened wide as her gaze travelled past my shoulders to the area behind me. It seemed like





Senpai had just noticed Yuri's presence, in no small reason due to the noise of the livehouse as well as Yuri's small stature.

"Julien Flaubert?"

The name flowed out from Senpai's lips. I was totally suppressed by her aura, so I turned my body aside. After exchanging sights with Senpai, Yuri nodded his head in confusion.

One step, two. Senpai moved in towards Yuri. I thought she would grab him by his hands, but I never expect her to cup Yuri's tiny face with her hands. Hey! I retorted in my mind, but I could not say anything. That was because both of them were enveloped in some sort of weird, strange-colored atmosphere. The noise around us seemed to die down in an instant.

"There's a saying that goes, '二度あることは三度ある'. I heard it's from a French saying. Is that true?" [TLNote: I think if you are to put it literally, it's something along the lines of 'a third incident will follow after the second one'.]

I could hear Senpai very clearly despite her soft murmuring. What was the point of her saying that all of a sudden?

Yuri's face went burning red as he blinked in response.

"Jamais deux sans trois." [TLNote: I think it means 'never two without three' literally.]

He replied softly in French.

"Mmm. Just one year ago, I thought I would never be attracted to another guy for the rest of my life. I never thought that my second will appear that simply before me."





For some unknown reason, Senpai directed her sight briefly towards me when she said that, but she turned back to Yuri quickly.

"And I never expect my third to come so soon."

"Huh?" Yuri blinked his large, shiny eyes repeatedly. "I don't quite understand what you mean. I am not too good with Japanese."







"Meaning to say, this is my declaration of love."

I subconsciously tugged Senpai by the back of her collar. "What do you think you're doing to someone whom you're seeing for the very first time?"

"The opposing nation's a strong one, plus our nation is weak when it comes to scoring points. So as a representative of Japan, I think it's best for me to go all out right from the beginning."

"What's the meaning of that? And please don't declare yourself as our representative! You'll be the shame of Japan, so stop that!"

"Urm, but I have two people in my heart already," said Yuri.

"That's okay. I had three, though it has just increased to four."

Said Senpai gently as she combed her fingers through Yuri's silky blonde hair.

"Wouldn't it make you look dishonest if the numbers are to keep increasing?"

"I'm not adding them just on a whim. I'll be dishonest to myself should I not admit that I am attracted to you. And a person like that would never be honest to others as well."

What, you guys are actually striking off a conversation just like that? That was unbelievable. Me alone was no longer enough to play the Tsukkomi, so I turned my head around to seek help from Tomo, but the tanned DJ had somehow disappeared. I looked around in a fluster, and when I located him on the stage, he was waving the baseball cap in his dark hands and saying, "Do your





best!". Damn that bastard, he sneaked away and left me alone by myself!

"I think it's better if you direct half of the enthusiasm you have right now to Naomi."

Yuri flashed a mischievous smile in the arms of Senpai.

"You're right, I do agree. Young man..... ah—"

"What?"

"I'll be offering half of my enthusiasm to you."

Why could I do nothing else but to allow my jaws to drop agape? I could not say anything despite that thought of mine. It has almost been a year since I met Senpai, and I've learned quite a number of things as well. In response, I grabbed Yuri by his shoulders and pulled him away from Senpai.

"Are you jealous, Naomi?"

"Don't you start talking rubbish as well!"

"We should be the ones who are jealous, isn't that so?"

Senpai pulled herself behind Yuri and whispered.

"That's right. So that means we are enemies."

How did both of them manage to converse normally? I really don't get it. You two might as well go on and on forever. Just as Yuri was turning around to look eye-to-eye with Senpai once more, the spotlights of the livehouse were suddenly extinguished. All that





was left were the bluish white spots from the disco ball dancing across the audience.

Before I knew it, my feet were already soaked by the deep and heavy discord played by the synthesized strings, and the water levels were rising higher and higher. My arms, my chest, my neck; my whole body was engulfed by the strings amid the dark livehouse. The stage lasers were flashing on the stage. As the crowd went wild, the guitarist and the vocalist's silhouette were imprinted against the darkness like the shadows of the thunderclouds. But despite the cheers and the crazy drumming, I could hear clearly the words Yuri said to Senpai.

"— My enemy, may I know your name?"

As well as Senpai's reply.

"Kagurazaka Kyouko. The revolutionary of love."





Chapter 3

Cabbage, Chocolate Parfait, Santa Claus

Before returning home, I showed up briefly at the celebration party and casually asked Tomo the price of the tickets to the Christmas concert. Four thousand yen each. That was expensive — about the cost of a professional concert. Tomo explained, "Can't be helped, the venue is large. It's a really stylish event, and I've even offered you an eighty-percent discount already." And Yuri, who was next to me, was surprised at how cheap the tickets were. I guess the price of the tickets to a concert of a famous classical musician would be on a totally different league.

Kagurazaka-senpai, who was having a drinking game with Taisei, ran up to me all of a sudden and asked, "What's with all the talk about Christmas and whatever?" I ended the conversation quickly in response to that. Yuri seemed to be pretty interested in all the liquor, so I pulled him out of the bar and set foot on our way home.

"Well then, I'll not pray for your success, but I'll still be supporting you anyway. Do your best."

Said Yuri as he went into the car which came to pick him up.

"What you you mean by that?"

"What I mean is, I'll pray for you to be rejected harshly by Mafuyu when you ask her out. You'll then run to me in tears, and I will do my best to console you."





As I pondered for an answer with my jaws wide open, the door was shut tight and the car drove away.

I was exhausted when I reached home, and was not in the mood to prepare dinner. I went straight to the garage instead. Coughing from the all the dust, I tried my hardest to locate the records I wanted . The records of Arthur Honegger's symphony <[Pacific 231](#)> as well as the ensemble <[Une Cantate de Noël](#)>. Okay. Now I'm done with the first present.

Back in my room, I pondered Yuri's words several times as I flipped through the cashbook. There was the possibility of Mafuyu rejecting my invitation, but Yuri did say "*How could she possibly decline you!?*". So should I believe him?

I'll never know if I do not properly confirm it with Mafuyu.

However, there were plenty of things for me to do before that.

Because of the unreasonable amount of cash that I spent on my bass, my monthly pocket money was all spent. Now, there was a live concert to attend this month. On top of that, the household finances was running very tight as well.

As I left my room and headed down the stairs, I was greeted by the theme of Rodolfo from <[La bohème](#)>. It was the scene where the broke poet was forced to burn his manuscripts for warmth as he was too poor to afford coal. I heaved a sigh in front of the door of our living room. Whenever the royalties came in late, Tetsurou would always put the music on full blast .

"Eight thousand~~~!?" That was my dad Tetsurou, lying down on the sofa in an uncouth manner. He cocked his eyebrows and said





unhappily, "Look, you've got quite the guts to ask for that despite knowing the financial situation of our house. Both of our pocket moneys were reduced by substantial amounts due to our daily expenses, isn't that so? Eight thousand yen is a huge sum of money! Huge!"

"I know, but....." My voice became tinier and tinier. For these past months, Tetsurou has not taken up any jobs due to his lack of motivation. Now factor in the royalties that were not yet paid to us, and we had ourselves in a really tight situation.

"Do you know how hard it is to earn eight thousand yen? And you do know how petty the people in my circle is, don't you? Money just disappears in a flash! Just a day ago, the cabaret club I went to was charging eight thousand..... wait wait wait don't flash the knife Nao! I'm lying I'm lying! I went to no cabaret!"

"You'll be revealed sooner or later anyway, so why are you wasting all the cash in secret?"

"Nah, I was thinking: Nao will not notice it if I top up the cash with what I won from horse racing."

"Horse racing!? You just said horse racing!? Despite the amount you squandered the last time you tried it again!?"

"Whoaaa! No wait! Urm, you heard it wrong – I was talking about the gay bar!" [TLNote: Horse racing (競馬) is pronounced as "keiba". And well, it sounds similar to gay bar.]

"Enough with those lame lies, that's not an excuse! Speaking of which, you didn't accept any job recently. Why did you reject requests to advertise the promotions?"





"I still have in me the pride of a critic! Moreover, I do belong to the educated class as well!"

"As someone who goes around snooping for news on Yuri, you've no right to call yourself that!"

"Ah, speaking of which, did you get me the three sizes of Yuri as I had requested?"

"He's a guy, damn it! And what's the point of you knowing that information?"

"You're really silly, Nao. In a highly capitalistic society with differing values, what we need are all sorts of information. The only ones who can make full use of the opportunities are industrial ruffians like me!"

So where did your critic's pride fly off to?

"In any case, the opportunity has not shown itself yet, so it's impossible for me to give you more pocket money. How about cutting down on the cash spent on our meals?"

"I did that already. I've used up all the my culinary techniques on cabbages for the past two weeks."

"Wow, I did not even notice that. Come to think of it, they were indeed all cabbages — that's just what you'll expect from Nao. It's no wonder Mika, Arisa, Rena and Aoi said to me, 'You've slimmed down quite a bit, Tetsurou!'."

"How many cabaret clubs did you visit, you damn bastard!?"

"I'm sorry, I really am!"





While the speakers were playing the bustling theme of Café Momus, Tetsurou squirmed his way through the sofa and the desk, trying to escape.

"O-Oh, Nao. I thought a way of a fixing our financial problems!"

"..... And that is?" I heaved a sigh and asked, chasing him between the television and the foliage plants.

"We can borrow some cash from Misako."

"Do you even have the pride of a man!?"

"Ha ha ha! Should I have that, I wouldn't have gotten married or filed a divorce, nor will I ever have Nao!"

That was nothing to be proud of. Also, can you stop putting on that smile of yours which says, "you'll have to thank me for that"?

"Moreover, what will be your excuse when you ask her for money?"

"Well..... Calling her will be Nao's job."

"What!? Don't screw around with me!"

"But Misako refuses to speak to me! It has been so half a year before our divorce. Come to think of it, I lost a family member when that happened....."

"And you're about to lose another one at this very moment."

"Don't leave me alone, Nao!"





Don't hug me, you're irritating. I sent Tetsurou flying with a kick and made my way to the phone — but not to call Misako, obviously. I have no idea how rotten my father was, but I did have a man's pride with me. I made a call to the publisher. Despite it being ten o'clock on a Saturday night, the magazine's editorial department was not like your typical companies — there would be someone around to receive the call. After informing them of my identity as Hikawa Tetsurou's son, I began rambling about how I used cabbages to make two weeks worth of meals. When I reached Friday's menu, which consisted of cabbage rolls with cabbage fillings, the man on the other end of the phone (whom I guessed was the chief editor) let out a painful cry and said tearfully, "I'll definitely send you the money by Monday!" before hanging up on me.

"..... Nao, you can live just fine even if I am not around, isn't it?"

"Are you insured, Tetsurou?"

"Sorry, it's Daddy's fault. I'll give you the eight thousand yen, so don't be angry."

Nope, it was not my intention to threaten you. But thank goodness — though everything may be for naught, depending on Mafuyu's answer.

"But Ebisawa Mafuyu should be under strict curfews, right? Ebichiri's a worry-wart after all."

"Eh? W-What are you talking about?" I was flustered by Tetsurou's words.

"And isn't eight thousand yen a little too expensive? I do know of cheaper hotels, you know?"





"What the heck are you talking about!?"

It was only until Monday noon that I was able to mention the Christmas event to Mafuyu.

I actually had planned to touch on it casually during our morning practices. However, I had only received a verbal promise from the editorial side. In order to prevent the embarrassing situation where I had no cash to purchase the tickets after Mafuyu's agreement, I actually sneaked out of school during lunch break to check the bank account. It was only after I ensured that the royalties were in did I return to school.

"Nao, where did you go to? The side dishes are finished already!"

Chiaki was pointing at me with her chopsticks while her other hand was holding onto a lunch box. After passing her my bento, she opened the lid immediately and peered at its contents.

"Look look! These may look like fried chicken, but they are actually cabbage! Isn't that impressive?"

Chiaki showcased my bento to Mafuyu and the other girls who were at the table besides me. No, this was nothing to be proud of, so please don't go around showcasing it.

"Nao has always been good at doing things like this — like turning tofu into mock burger patties. I've always wanted to eat this again."





Said Chiaki as she narrowed her eyes into slits. As for Mafuyu, her gaze was going to-and-fro the bento and my face. Terada and the rest of the girls came over, and what followed was a series of exclamations like: "Is this really cabbage?"

"Let's just do a Hikawa Restaurant for next year's school festival," Class-rep Terada's suggestion sent the girls into a frenzy. "Nao, can you make chocolate parfait with tofu?" "How about cakes with cabbage?" You better pray that I can.

Just then, Mafuyu mumbled,

"..... Chiaki has been eating Naomi's dishes all this while?"

"Mmm, they always invite me for parties and stuff. Like during Christmas, for example. Each year, Uncle would always show off the new sounds system that he bought. I couldn't understand a single bit of what he said, but I do know Nao's cooking is delicious."

Mafuyu scowled and moved her gaze from Chiaki to me. Urm, what was wrong?

"Do you two celebrate Christmas every year?"

My heart pumped wildly from Mafuyu's sudden question. I never expected her to touch on the subject of Christmas.

"We spent it together almost every year," answered Chiaki in my stead. I could only nod my head in agreement since she was looking at me with a meaningful smile on her face. From the murderous auras around me, I could tell that the guys in our class was listening to our conversation intently beyond the wall of girls that was surrounding us. "He actually spends Christmas together





with Chiaki every year?" "Go die, Nao." "Stuff yourself with cabbage cake." The combined attack of the words of resentments and Mafuyu's gaze was more than I could handle. I came up with a random reply and escaped away from the classroom.

I plugged the bass to the amplifiers when I reached the practice room. I waited for my heartbeats to return to their usual pace before sitting down on the round chair with a sigh.

Oi, why are you running away? — I thought to myself.

Didn't the conversation go unexpectedly towards the topic on Christmas? You should have gone with the flow and asked Mafuyu! Check if she was free this year! How was she planning to spend her Christmas? Wasn't that easy enough?

Of course not. The whole class was watching us. I would definitely stir up something huge should I pop the question before everyone. But then again, could I really find the opportunity to do just that? I am really useless.

I mean, I have never once invite a girl to spend Christmas together. Chiaki did come over most of the time to play, but that was because Tetsurou invited her to.

If I was able to ask Mafuyu out, we will be together alone. On our way home from the livehouse, we will be strolling together on streets beneath the night sky, surrounded by the Christmas jingles. Wham!, Yamashita Tatsuro, or the B'z..... wait a second, why were they all songs about unrequited love? I shook my head hard in an attempt to shake the melodies away from my mind. That was really inauspicious.





I gripped the neck of the bass as I tried thinking about typical Christmas songs. Perhaps that will grant me courage to ask Mafuyu out.

Fumbling the strings with my fingers, a slow melody began to flow.

What was surprising was the fact that I managed to remember the complete Latin lyrics of <Ave Maria>, composed by Gounod. The accompaniment to <Ave Maria> was written to be superimposed over Book I of Bach's <[The Well-Tempered Clavier](#)>.

That was the first piece Mafuyu played for me, back on a certain day.

She played it at the junkyard located at the end of the world, so that I could locate this bass.

When did I fall in love with Mafuyu? I recalled every day that I spent together with her while humming to the tune of the hymn.

The spring when we met; the summer when we brushed by each other; the autumn when we were separated.

We were always linked by music.

Perhaps it should not be so. I had no intention of blaming the god of music, but the current me do not even know what Mafuyu has in mind. Songs were always the media used to convey my feelings that I could not put into words—

The door behind me creaked open suddenly, causing me to swallow the melody back into my throat in surprise. My fingers remained frozen on the strings. I turned around, and in the opening of the door was a pair of blue eyes and hair colored maroon.





"Ah. S-Sorry."

Why was I apologizing?

"It's okay to come in."

We are to gather at the practice room after we were done with our lunch during the break. I couldn't possibly hog the room by myself just because I was dwelling on some negative thoughts. Mafuyu slid timidly into the room. She then closed the door after a quick peek outside the room.

"Ah—" "Urm—"

Our voice overlapped each other's. We exchanged looks, but we turned our gazes to the floor immediately after that. Neither of us said anything. After a brief silence, I worked up the courage to lift my head as I prepared myself to speak, but Mafuyu did the exact same thing as well, so we turned our gaze away once again. What the heck were we doing?

Mafuyu took a seat on the round chair. Since I did not lift my head, the only thing I could see was her feet. An awkward silence permeated the cold and dense air of the practice room. Crap, I have to say something. I mean, it was the rare opportunity that both of us were together alone. And yet I could not come up with anything.

Just as we were about to be worn down by time like two wax statues, a blurry sound came suddenly from the direction of the sun. It was a duet between a horn and a trombone — it probably came from the band practice; the melody played was the all too familiar tune, <[Joy to the World](#)>. They were repeating the same





phrase again and again, but the speed was getting faster and faster..... wait a second? Hey! Why is the tune changing to the [main theme of Lupin III](#)? I nearly fell off my feet. At the same time, Mafuyu stood up angrily and was about to turn around.

We crossed sight. This time around, we couldn't help but to let out laughs. Mafuyu swayed her long maroon hair and returned back to her seat.

"It looks like it's a standing tradition for the band to come up with some sort of prank during their yearly performance."

"I did something like that before."

That was surprising. I never thought Mafuyu as someone that fools around. That was quite unimaginable.

"During my performance of Book 2 of <[The Well-Tempered Clavier](#)>, I slipped <[Santa Claus is Coming to Town](#)> into its fugue. Back then, I was thinking to myself: Why was I forced to hold a Christmas concert? But I was even more depressed when no one noticed my prank."

"Ah....."

I was speechless. Mafuyu's expression darkened as she lifted her legs onto the chair and hugged her knees.

I see. So she had to work on Christmas Eve as well. But what about last year? She should have dropped the piano then already.

"Last year, I spent the whole day together with Hitomi in my house."





Hitomi..... oh, that was Miss Matsumura. She was the young female butler of the Ebisawa household. A mysterious and expressionless lady.

"What about your father? He's probably not in Japan at that time, isn't it?"

"Papa was performing Beethoven's Ninth." [TLNote: short for Beethoven's Symphony no.9]

I see. So the reason Ebichiri came back only at the end of the year was because he forced the performance of Beethoven's Ninth into his schedule huh? Urm, well then..... I took a deep breath.

"..... What..... about this year then?"

Mafuyu's hair shook for a moment. I could almost feel her flinching despite our distance.

I said it. I actually asked. When I regained my senses, my gaze had landed on the floor once more. I have to look at her in the face.

Mafuyu and I looked into each other's eyes.

The deep-sea blue eyes of hers were filled with unease.

"Urm, well, d-do you have..... any..... plans for this..... Christmas?"

I was struck by a sudden pang of nervousness. As I tried to squeeze the words out of me, my eyes landed on the area near Mafuyu's lips.

Mafuyu shook her head slowly.





"I think..... it will probably be the same as last year."

An inconceivable and warm sensation came flowing upwards from my stomach into area beneath my lungs. It was thumping wildly. Now was not the time for me to be happy just yet. The crucial thing was what happens next. Come on, say it out.

"Well, then..... together—"

I was so nervous, I had even forgotten how to speak. Together? Mafuyu tilted her head in response to that word.

Just then, the door to the practice room flung open suddenly. The main theme of Lupin III came rushing into the room, and Mafuyu's hair soared to the gush of air. Next to the surprised Mafuyu was a long, slender silhouette. I swallowed the words that were in my mouth.

"Kyouko.....?"

There was a tremble in Mafuyu's murmurs. It was actually due to this interruption that I realized I could even feel the thumping of my heart through my ears.

"Nice timing. So you two were here as well."

With her hand resting against the door, Senpai flashed a clear smile.

"Geez, Senpai! That's just too pushy of you!"

A voice came from the back of Senpai — Chiaki popped her head out. Her eyes came into brief contact with mine, before alternating





between Mafuyu and I. Her cheeks were all puffed up. What was going on around here?

"The next live performance has been decided."

Said Senpai as she grabbed Chiaki by her hands and walked into the room.

"Eh....."

Why the sudden decision..... actually, that was just the way she was. Mafuyu was actually retreating towards the wall due to her shock. Senpai fished out a piece of photocopy paper from her chest and spread it out on the amplifiers.

"Or more specifically, we're not guaranteed a spot on the stage. It's going to be a huge event with the participation of professional bands, so whether we can get on stage will depend on the audition results. Just the thing for our next performance, yeah?"

"Eh, ah, yeah....."

I shifted my gaze onto the piece of paper and froze on the spot.

The event was named <Snow Crash>. I think I heard it somewhere before — yeah, Tomo did mention it at the livehouse back then.....

"..... A-And it will be held on?"

I already knew the answer — it was even written clearly on the piece of paper. But I still could not help but to ask that incredibly stupid question. Kagurazaka-senpai flashed what was probably the brightest smile I had ever seen from her yet, and replied.





"24th December. Christmas Eve."





Chapter 4

Two Melodies, Two Voices

That was the fifth time I saw that car.

After a turn, I was standing at a position where I could see the garage of my house. One look and I knew immediately what was going on here — because that was the fifth time already. The sun was already setting due to shorter days of the winter. The black engine hood of the foreign car gave off a faint shimmer due to the rays from the porch lights. I could also hear the rumbling sounds of an orchestra.

There was no point in running away (since this was my house). I sighed and opened the door at the porch.

"That's why I'm asking you to try it once! It will definitely be interesting! Since you're planning to play this piece faithfully, you should be faithful in areas like this as well, shouldn't you?"

"Don't be silly! The replacement melody is written precisely because the soloist could not hit the high notes during the very first performance!"

"But it's printed on the published scores too! Come on, try it! You never know, it may just fit!"





"Do you want me to wreck the performance or something? And you're asking me to find a second baritone just for this part? What rubbish!"

"Or how about you sing it?"

"Enough of your jokes!"

Tetsurou and Ebisawa Chisato, separated by a table with a few pieces of papers on it, were engaged in a heated argument when I entered the living room. The booming melody of Beethoven's <Symphony No. 9> was playing in the background, but the two guys were arguing with voices that were comparable to the tune of the orchestra. On one side was a famous conductor in his crisp suit and with his white hair; on the other, the industry's ruffian, though his sloppy sportswear made him look more like a hobo instead. If one saw the scene in which they were pointing at each other's nose and arguing at the top of their lungs, I doubt there would anyone who would deny the fact that they used to be classmates.

I originally planned to sneak past the kitchen unnoticed, but was called out by them.

"So you're back, Nao. Listen to me, Ebichiri is just atrocious!"

"Oh right, help me drill some sense into him. Hikawa's actually coming up with all these crazy suggestions for the arrangement."

Wait, why are you guys throwing the problems on me? I'm both physically and mentally drained already. Senpai came up with the sudden decision to participate in the live performance yesterday. And thanks to the auditions, our practices were really solid.

Moreover, I could not invite Mafuyu out during Christmas eve.





While I was engrossed in my own thoughts, Tetsurou grabbed me by my shoulders and made me sit down before the table. Before me was the conductor score for <Symphony No. 9>.

"Urm..... so what's going on here?"

"Ebichiri's intention is to reproduce Beethoven's original intentions faithfully during his performance of Beethoven's Ninth at the end of the year. Therefore, he's removing the revisions made by Wagner and Weingartner!"

"Oh....." Just let him be.

"This is just unbelievable! He's even intending to reproduce the trumpet parts that were gnawed away by the worms in the final movement! Muhuhuhu, now I'm burning with anticipation. I'll definitely come up with a great article to blast his performance."

As there were various problems with Beethoven's handwritten scores, his future musicians added in all sorts of arrangements to Beethoven's Ninth. That is to say, the Beethoven's Ninth that we were used to (regardless of whether it was good or bad), was different from what Beethoven had originally envisioned. So Ebichiri wanted to return it to what was before?

"There were actually supposed to be two melodies to the baritone's recitativo. And so I asked him to change it to a duet as it was supposed to be in the scores. But Ebichiri rejected my proposition."

"But of course. It's not supposed to be a duet."

"Who cares, just try it! Listen to this, Nao. Ebichiri, you sing the second part."





Tetsurou stopped the CD and played the tape instead. What came out was the voice of Ebichiri as he gave the orchestra his instructions. The tape was probably recorded during a practice. The last movement of Beethoven's Ninth began shortly after. The dissonance between the strings and the band clashed against each other, and reached a climax after the collapse. The two middle-aged men beside me began singing, "O Freunde!" — my head hurts from their duet. What the hell were they doing? Look at their ages.....

"This will definitely become a joke."

Ebichiri snapped, stopped singing and switched off the tape recorder.

"Why? Our voices were really consistent, no? Oh I know, I'll go on stage as the second baritone. I'll charge you cheaper for the performance fees — I mean, I used to be in the choir as well. What do you think about my singing, Nao?"

"I want to go home....."

I was at my limits. I did not come to this world so that I could do a comedy act together with these middle-aged men!

"Which home? You're referring to Misako's house?"

"It's quite problematic for me if you're asking me that question seriously....." Anywhere but here, damn it! I guess I might as well escape to Misako's house.





"But Misako will be at Hong Kong all the way until the end of the month, so she's not at home. Her company has plans to expand into China."

"Why do you know that?"

Tetsurou said Misako would criticize him really harshly whenever they met after the divorce. There were even times when she refused to speak to him.

"Ahaha, that's because she's actually still in love with me. Whenever I called her occasionally, she would say things like, 'I'll be busy from this date to that date due to these activities, so you're prohibited from calling me!'. Her words may be harsh, but she would keep me informed about her schedule. What a dishonest woman she is! Isn't that really cute?"

"Then don't get divorced in the first place! It's about time you two face reality!"

"I wouldn't have enrolled to the College of Music if I could do what you've said."

"Do not lump me together with you, Hikawa. I enrolled into college with the aim of becoming a professional musician."

"Drop that cool act of yours, Ebichiri. You've divorced once as well, so we should be fellow comrades, isn't that so? Oh yeah, we're buddies! Let's sing together songs filled with happiness and joy!"

Tetsurou went crazy and began singing <[Ode to Joy](#)>, so I tossed a cushion at him in order to shut him up. Just as I picked up my bass and was about to walk out of the living room.....





"Ah, ahem."

Ebichiri cleared his throat behind me. I had a bad feeling about this.

"Actually, I came here because I had something to ask you."

I placed my hand on the door knob as I tried my hardest to hold back the feeling of resignation that was spreading throughout my body. I see, I guessed just as much. It has always been like this.

After placing my bass behind the sofa, I took a seat once more.

"U-Urm. What do you wish to know?"

But I knew it would be something related to Mafuyu even before his answer. Ebichiri crossed his fingers and rested his chin on it. He hesitated for a moment before saying,

"My Beethoven's Ninth concert will last only until the 23rd. I'll be taking a rest after that."

"Ok."

"And so, well....." Surprisingly, Ebichiri shifted his gaze away. There was a long pause before he continued, "I do wish to celebrate Christmas with my family once in a while."

I knew that I was sweating behind my back, and I had a really good idea why Ebichiri showed up at my house. I really felt like running away.

"Little did I expect her to reject me after I said that to her yesterday. It seems like Mafuyu will be busy on the 24th."





Stop looking at me with your eyes lifted upwards. It was really disgusting, you know?

"And then..... mmm..... I asked her what she will be doing, but she refused to give me an answer."

"I know the answer. Isn't there a love hotel located behind the shopping mall that's in front of the bus station? That must be it. It's the only hotel in the vicinity that cost eight thousand yen a night."

"Just shut up, Tetsurou....."

I had no strength left in me to come up with any retorts. "Did you just say a love hotel!?" Ebichiri sprung up in anger, but I was drained of my strength to calm him down.

The eight thousand yen was useless anyway.

I recalled what happened during the lunch break that day. Kagurazaka-senpai came barging into the room suddenly when Mafuyu and I were the only people inside. She then announced the schedule for the live performance.

The first person to snap back to reality was Mafuyu.

"..... An audition?"

"Yeah. This is an actual commercial activity, and I managed to squeeze ourselves in at the very last moment. I had sent in the tapes already. Our audition will be held in the beginning of the next month. A live performance."





Senpai was pacing in circles around the room; Chiaki, who was behind Senpai, was crossing her arms with an expression of resignation; Mafuyu was leaning against the sound system; as for me, I had to put my arm against the amplifiers to steady myself. It was not the first time I experienced this firsthand, but Senpai was really acted swiftly. She should have only heard about the Christmas event <Snow Crash> at the same time as I did, which was last Saturday, from Tomo.

"I've already confirmed the fact that my fellow comrades will be free on Christmas eve. I believe everyone will fight alongside with me this time as well, yes?"

Senpai scanned our faces once more as she popped the question with a bright smile on her face.

Mafuyu glanced at me hesitantly for some reason. Our Christmas Eve was shattered just like that, floating between us. What should I do?

Mafuyu moved her gaze away all of a sudden.

"Have you decided on the piece which we will be performing during the audition?"

I could feel the lifeline snapping apart when I heard Mafuyu 's question. Our date on Christmas eve — no, even though it was not a definite thing, but.....

"..... Are you okay with this?"





Asked Chiaki as she popped her head from behind Senpai's shoulder. I had no idea if she was directing that question to me or Mafuyu; I did not know what she was trying to confirm.

But Mafuyu nodded her head slightly in response. She then made her way to the guitar's amplifiers and picked up the photocopied brochure of the event.

"A disco event? That means we'll have to perform songs of that genre as well?"

"Well, the event will be held at a club, so disco is the type of music that is more popular among our target audience, especially when you bring their age into consideration. However, it will be boring if disco's all we do. I do have a few propositions in mind."

Senpai pulled out a few MDs from the guitar case and stacked them onto the guitar amplifiers. She then fished out a few stacks of scores as well.

"The audition will be twenty minutes long. I plan to spend half the time on passacaglia to surprise the hell out of our judges."

"I do agree that we should make full use of whatever methods that are available to us. I've no problem with performing that for twenty minutes non-stop if that's what you want," Chiaki joined in the conversation from the side next to the amplifiers.

"We have the advantage of two vocals, so I am planning to show them our prowess in the later half of the audition."

"I wish to use the synthesizers if possible. The performance was nowhere near perfect during the school festival."





"I do agree with that, but I think we'll be facing quite a few problems visually. I'll have to come up with something."

"Right, if we synchronize with the guitar—"

The only thing I could do was to stare at the three girls exchanging their views seriously while I remained rooted on the floor. It was only until Senpai pinched me on my cheeks that body unfroze itself.

"..... Nao? Hello, Nao?"

I finally regained my senses when my face was slapped repeatedly. Tetsurou face was right before mine, so I retreated on reflex, and that caused me to nearly fall backwards. Ebichiri stared at me with irritation from the sofa. Shit, how long did I blanked out?

"Why are you spacing out? You should at least wait till December before you dream about that passionate night on Christmas eve."

"T-That's not it!"

I realized Ebichiri was glaring at me with a really scary expression on his face. I swallowed my words immediately.

"Urm, well, in any case, it's nothing like what you're imagining."

"What do you mean by that? Are you planning to spend the night outside together with Mafuyu again?"

"That's right, Nao. It will only cost you four thousand eight hundred yen if you're resting at the hotel. There is no need to spend the night there."





"Tetsurou—" "Shut your trap, Hikawa!"

"The love hotel's a really messy place during Christmas eve, you know? I'm offering you advise because I am worried about you as your parent." I don't need those sort of concerns from my parent!

"I-In any case!" I kicked Tetsurou aside and turned towards Ebichiri. I raised my voice.

"It's not just Mafuyu and I. We'll be holding a live performance on the 24th."

"A live performance.....?"

The colors of Ebichiri's face changed at least seven times — there were times when it was fuming red, others when it was ghastly white. He then heaved a huge sigh and slumped his body deep into the sofa.

"The band again huh..... But we did talk about her resuming the concerts next year."

There was an obvious displeasure in his voice.

"She is practicing on the piano as well, isn't she?"

"Of course. But to be perfectly honest, I am still against Mafuyu playing in the band."

"Why..... is that so?"

"According to Matsumura, the amount of time Mafuyu spent practicing her piano was way more than what she used to do two





years ago. But despite that, she's practicing on the guitar as well. You do know just how straining that is, don't you?"

I clenched my fists unconsciously. She actually increased the time spent on practice? Going by the average time a professional spent on the piano each day, she would be practicing on the piano for at least six hours a day when she reaches home each day. And considering the fact that our band practice ends at six in the evening, that means she'll be practicing till midnight at the very least. And she was actually practicing much more than that? When does she sleep?

"Mafuyu is doing all this on her own will, and that includes the band as well. But you do know she has the bad habit of forcing herself without giving any consideration to her body."

I could only nod my head in response to that.

"And so, how should I put it? That girl is continuing on with the band because she wants to be with you, isn't it? If you tell her that it is no longer necessary—"

"Please, enough of this joke of yours."

My voice sounded like it was pressing against a blunt blade or something; Ebichiri was forced to swallow his words. I do know it was selfish of me to say that, but those were my true feelings.

"Mafuyu..... she..... she did not join the band for reasons like that. It's because she's the guitarist of feketerigó. It's because she enjoys creating music together with Senpai, Chiaki, and..... me. That's the reason why she's staying in the band."



"..... Is that so? I am sorry."

Mafuyu chose the band instead of me. But I do know very well just how abnormal that thought of mine was.

Ebichiri said with a calm voice all of the sudden. He then stood up.

"Sorry for interrupting."

"That guy has taken quite a liking to you, Nao. That's the reason why he comes over frequently."

"Eh? Ehh? Eh h h h h h h h h h?"





"Moreover, I'm the only friend he has in Japan. It must be really lonely for him."

"Now that's quite the lonely life he has....."

Tetsurou is his only friend? He might actually be better off without any.

"..... Well then, when will Mafuyu come over to greet her new father-in-law?"

"You've been rattling non-stop! Damn it!"

"Because you had called Mafuyu directly by her name several times already, but Ebichiri was totally fine with that. Since her father has accepted you already, it will be just a matter of time."

"Eh? N-No way!"

But then again, t-that might actually be true! Whoa! What should I do? Was Ebichiri pissed off from that.....?

"Hurry up get yourself engaged with her. I am dying to see Ebisawa Mafuyu in a kimono."

"Get engaged yourself!"

I never expected Tetsurou to play pretend with the music of Beethoven in the background as he imagined the engagement scene. My headache was kicking in again, so I ran to my room with my head in my arms.





Chapter 5

Mini Amplifier, Water Tower, Le Tango Perpétuel

"Stop!"

Yelled Chiaki from behind the drums as she lifted her hands that gripped firmly the drum sticks. I stopped my hands from strumming the strings and wiped the sweat off of my forehead.

Senpai and Mafuyu pressed the neck of their guitars with their right hand to end the lingering sounds. The rock tempo that filled the Folk Music Club practice room just a second ago had turned into a painful sound of killjoy in my ears.

The three girls looked at me at the same time. Unable to withstand the inquiring gaze of Mafuyu, the teasing look of Senpai as well as the emotional gaze of Chiaki, I was forced to rest my eyes on the bass in my hands.

"You tell him, Comrade Aihara. I guess we're all thinking the same thing, but you're the only one whom young man will listen to right now."

Chiaki nodded and pointed her drum stick in my direction.

"Quit sticking to me all the time!"





I almost dropped the bass from my hands from the shock. I was surprised by the meaning behind her words — though in a musical sense, of course.

"I deliberately played the tempo slowly to portray the lazy mood! It will not do if you play similarly to me and overemphasize the laziness! The bass and the drums operate on a different timing, so you'll have to be livelier than that!"

"Uh....."

Chiaki's words hit me really hard, because I knew very well that she was right.

"It looks like you lack practice, young man. You thought I did not notice you fumbling your way through the fill-ins during the unisons?"

The sinister grin on Senpai's face made her look like she was teasing a cat — I shrunk my body in response.

"Are you trying to screw things up so that we fail the audition?"

"N-No way!"

I swung my hands hard in denial. However, Senpai's smile did not disappear.

"Here, Comrade Ebisawa. Tease him a little too."

"E-Eh?" Mafuyu's hair flinched because of the sudden words of Senpai. However, her sapphire-blue eyes were still fixed intently on my face. Just as I was about to turn my body away, Mafuyu spoke.





"..... Coward. Why didn't you express yourself clearly?"

That was the line which surprised me the most — to the point where I flicked off the power of the bass' amplifiers. Urm, she was referring to how my bass sounded, right? Senpai gave a loud laugh.

"Let's take a rest! Young man will need some time to reflect on things as well."

"For how long? It's already five, so there's not much time left."

Mafuyu's fingers, which were placed on the strings of the guitar, moved uneasily.

"Till the sleeping young man wakes up?"

"It will take until next year for that! There's only a few days left till the audition! When exactly is it anyway?" asked Chiaki.

"It's not confirmed yet. There are quite a number of bands that have registered for the event. I think they should be contacting us soon."

"Will we be performing the actual songs during the audition?" interrupted Mafuyu. "We'll have to decide on the order of the songs. There are quite a few songs that I want to play."

"Hey, how about we put in some Christmas carols at the end of our performance which the audience can sing along to? I mean, it's Christmas eve."

"I think we should just aim to clear the audition with songs we're familiar with for now. That's an option for us as well—"





I listened to their conversation from a distance away. I then pulled the wire away from the amplifier and plugged it into a mini amplifier instead.

"..... I'll practice by myself for a while."

Mafuyu was surprised by that — she was about to remove the guitar strap from her shoulders. I turned around and opened the door. What greeted me was the rays from the setting sun in the icy winter.

The rooftop that I would typically go to was located right above our practice room, so I made my way to the rooftop located on the other side of the school. The sun was already deep below the horizon. As the school was slowly enshrouded in darkness, I could see the small silhouettes of the baseball team tidying up the court.

On the sides of stairs to the protruding roof was a ladder, which led to a large water tower on top. I heaved the bass on my back and climbed my way up. When I sat down and viewed the scenery before me, I could see the lights scattered across the streets on the opposite side of our school. It looked much more like the starry skies than the real thing above my head.

I placed the mini amplifier besides me, rested my bass on my leg and began to fiddle with the strings. I played the same phrase over and over again slowly at half the original tempo.

However, I could not immerse myself in the music. It was as if the strings managed to read my thoughts — it felt like they were rejecting my fingers.





Senpai's words rang in my ears.

"Are you trying to screw things up so that we fail the audition?"

That was never my intention. However, I would be lying if I say that idea never crossed my mind after Senpai told us about the audition.

Why must it be on the twenty-fourth? It would have been great if it was held on another day.

What baffled me even more was Mafuyu — she seemed to be incredibly pumped about it. I do know I was wrong for taking that to heart, but even so.....

It would not do if things went on like this. I would be dragging the girls down yet again — I was plagued by this feeling ever since our live performance in the school festival. I did improve compared to half a year ago, but the three girls - especially Chiaki - were climbing upwards at an even faster pace. For the current me who could only strum to the best of my ability but was unaware of the things are going on around me, I will definitely be left far behind by them. I should just forget the thing about Mafuyu. It wasn't like I actually asked her out on Christmas Eve anyway.

My thoughts were pulled to the scene where Mafuyu and I were alone in the room, the moment just before Senpai came barging in.

It would have been great if I could have at least popped the question.

My fingers had stopped when I regained my senses. I let out a wry laugh. Was I not here to do some practice alone? Why was I allowing my thoughts to run astray?





"—Naomi?"

I was shocked by the voice from the darkness — I forgot the fact that I was sitting on the ledge of the tower and almost attempted to stand up due to the surprise. That was dangerous.

Looking downwards, I crossed sights with Mafuyu, who was popping her head out through the door leading to the roof. For a second, I wanted to find a place where I could hide. However, the small space on the tower was barely enough for someone to sit by himself.

"U-Urm....."

I took a deliberate grip at the bass to put on the act that I was practicing hard, and at the same time I tried to come up with something to say. Mafuyu turned her head around and caught sight of the ladder.

"W-Wait."

Mafuyu ignored my nervousness and gripped onto the ladder. But for some reason, she was only using her left hand. She pressed her chest against the vertical pillar and climbed up clumsily. I leaned my body outwards quickly and stretched my hand to pull Mafuyu up.

Mafuyu stood on the cramped space next to the water tower, panting and heaving as she gripped on my hand tightly. Her face was ghastly white.

"A-Are you alright?"





"..... I'm okay, just a little scared."

Then why come up? And also—

My gaze landed on Mafuyu's right hand, which she was using to grab onto the edges of my coat.

"Your right hand..... it can't be..... that you can't move it again?"

"Eh? Ah, n-no."

Mafuyu shook her head. Her maroon hair came into contact with my chest.

"T-This is just a habit from the past..... when I realized it, I was already doing things with only my left hand."

Don't push yourself. I stared hard at the fingers of Mafuyu's right hand, which was buried before my chest. When she realized what was happening, a blushing Mafuyu retracted her arm quickly. However, we were still forced to sit side by side with our arms coming contact into each other due to the small amount of space around the water tower.

And with that, the two of us looked downwards at the school surrounded by the walls amid the darkness. At the same time, we were counting the each other's thumping heartbeats. Despite my desire to convert my breaths into speech, my voice was jammed up in my throat because of the nervousness due to the sleeves of the winter uniform that stuck tightly against my skin.

Again. It was always the same. But with Mafuyu sitting next to me, my mind was in a blank state because of the warmth of her body.





The frustration which was tormenting me earlier had disappeared as well. Why was this happening?

Come to think about it, Mafuyu and I did come into contact countless number of times ever since we knew each other. However, the painful, conscious throbbing I was experiencing right now was because of my realization of my feelings.

Painful. Yes, it was painful.

"U-Urm."

Finally, Mafuyu spoke once more. Her voice was no longer trembling.

"M-Mmm."

"Are you not angry?"

I couldn't help but to look in Mafuyu's direction. Half of her face was hidden by the shadow.

"Why..... but I am not angry....."

I was not angry. Just losing myself.

"But, it seems like..... you dislike the practices."

"I don't dislike them!"

I almost fall off because I suddenly turned my body. "Whoa!" "Kyaa!" I gripped hard onto the leg of the water tower, while Mafuyu grabbed me by my shoulder. I managed to maintain my balance.





When I recovered from my shock, I turned my head to look at Mafuyu's face. Despite the fact that Mafuyu's face was burning red, she did not let her hands go.

"I knew from the sounds. Naomi's bass was trying to run away from my Stratocaster."

I was stunned. I never thought music would express my feelings that simply; furthermore, they may not always be on my side. I gripped hard at the neck of my bass placed on my thigh. Just a thought — should there be a day when I master the instrument and play it on an entirely different level, would I be able to play the bass calmly despite the hesitation and confusion I was experiencing in my heart?

"Did you have something planned for Christmas? Back then, you—"

She popped the question.

I took a deep breath and nodded to prepare myself mentally. I then turned towards the sapphire-blue eyes which were reflecting the starry skies.







"I was thinking about what birthday present I should give."

The blue, icy walls in Mafuyu's eyes were melting away silently.

"You know Arthur Honegger? He's a French composer. I originally wanted to give you the <Une Cantate de Noël> record composed by him. Urm, I have a friend who will be performing that piece on stage during Christmas. It's a great song, so....."

My parched throat was about to tear apart.

"I originally..... wanted to..... attend the live concert..... together..... with Mafuyu. But..... well..... Senpai said we are to take part in the audition..... for that live performance."

I could feel my face getting hotter and hotter while I said that. I was afraid that I'll shift my gaze back to my knees, so I stiffened my neck muscles and continued.

"I originally wanted..... the two of us..... to spend Christmas together. But....."

"Why?"

Mafuyu raised her voice all of the sudden. I moved my head backwards in surprise.

"Why did you not tell me?"

The light in her eyes were shimmering on the surface of the waters.

"N-No, but, Senpai has already fixated on the live performance!"

"That has nothing to do with it! You should tell me all the same!"





"Sorry....." Though I had no idea why she was that angry. "Urm, well, if we did not pass through the audition stage, we could....."

"You idiot!"

Mafuyu gave a forceful tug at my tie. It hurts.

"We have to pass it! I'll never forgive anyone who dares to screw it up deliberately! Not even you, Naomi!"

"No, sorry. Don't you worry, I'll never do that."

"We will be able to perform together live as long as we pass the auditions, no?"

I was stunned for awhile from her words.

I will be able to attend the live Christmas performance together with Mafuyu, even though that means we'll be taking part in it as performers. Indeed. Moreover, I'll be able to save on the concert tickets. But still.....

"I want to perform live."

Murmured Mafuyu as she pressed her palms against my chest while she stared at my bass that blended into the night sky.

"I wish to stand on the same stage together with Naomi..... and Chiaki, and Kyouko. Forever and ever."

"..... Do you enjoy performing live that much?"





Mafuyu's words flowed out from within her. I was suppressed by those feelings of hers which felt like they were searing my skin. I accidentally asked that silly question impulsively. Mafuyu nodded her head slowly.

"It's saddening each time I get on stage."

"Eh.....?"

"Because it will be all over soon."

Mafuyu's words froze into frost and scattered in the sky.

"It will have to end some day, and that is saddening — if only this could go on forever."

Mafuyu placed her ten fingers onto my arm, dancing to an uneasy tempo on the imaginary keyboard. I knew what the piece was despite not being able to hear any sound. The music came through the contact of Mafuyu's fingers as they tapped on my skin. Erik Satie. <[Le Tango Perpétuel](#)>.

"Back when piano was my everything, I never thought I would be experiencing feelings like this."

I nodded my head silently. It's the same for me as well. Back when all I did was to listen to the music of others, I never knew such passion or pulsation exists.

"I want to continue playing. I want to allow Kyouko to sing, I wish to move forward together with Chiaki..... and I want to listen to the sound of your heartbeats."

"..... Mmm."





Thinking back on how I was all emotional earlier on, it was really embarrassing. My thoughts were silly compared to Mafuyu's clear feelings for the band.

But then, Mafuyu kept quiet and turned her head away.

"..... And so, I'm sorry."

"..... For?"

"Christmas. W-We're unable..... t-to spend Christmas together..... by ourselves."

"Eh? Ah, no," I was in a fluster. Did she see through my intentions?
"It's okay, I don't mind."

"You don't? Why?"

"I haven't bought the tickets anyway..... It hurts it hurts! Mafuyu! Let go of me!"

For some reason, Mafuyu sunk her fingernails that were originally on my arms deep into my skin. Why was she pissed off at what I said?

I don't get it. Would it be better if I minded?

"I am not talking about the tickets! Don't you feel it's a shame?"

"No, of course I do. But it can't be helped, right?"

"Even if there is nothing you can do....." Mafuyu slapped me repeatedly on my arms. It was dangerous! We'll fall off! "It's all





your fault! It would have been okay if you told me about your plans for Christmas earlier!"

"Uhh..... Sorry."

Mafuyu was right. It was my fault for not voicing my plans, which made Senpai think we were all free for the live concert..... Eh?

Something hit me. I asked Tomo about the price of the Christmas concert tickets back then — did Senpai know about that? It seemed like she was interested in what was happening, but who filled her in? No wait, she wouldn't have planned the live performance if she knew about it. It was probably just me thinking too deeply into it.

The more important thing was: I'll have to come up with another present. I could still give her the Honegger record, but I did blurt it out already. I hope the present could be a surprise, if possible. It would be really boring if I gave her what I originally had in mind.

Moreover, if we are attending as performers, we may have to prepare ourselves at the backstage, and we might miss the performance from Tomo's band. If so, it will be meaningless to gift Mafuyu <Une Cantate de Noël>. I somehow feel we'll be able to get through the auditions, despite the lack of evidence that we will — Mafuyu wants to pass, and it's the same for me as well. Also, Mafuyu's guitar techniques were getting better each passing day. Was it because she had finally found an outlet to her thirst for passion?

Mafuyu's desire. The never-ending stage.

"Ah....."





That came to me all of the sudden, followed up shortly by the dumb things I had done. I hugged my head and lowered it in dismay.

"Ahhhhhhhhh....."

"..... W-What's wrong? Sorry, does it hurt?"

Mafuyu stopped herself from slapping my arm and inquired worryingly.

"Eh? Ah, no, not that."

I let go of my hands, but my head was still burrowed between my knees.

"I just thought of what I should give you....."

It was quite a smart idea — to me anyway. Mafuyu should be happy with it as well. But I gave that to Chiaki already. It was The Beatles' <Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band>. And it must be the British version of the vinyl record. Though I've no idea if I can locate another one.

"..... Sorry, it's nothing. I'll definitely find a way to get it before the birthday."

"Birthday..... mine?"

"M-Mmm." She won't be troubled by that, right? I'll do nothing more than to pass it to her secretly in school.

"It falls on a Sunday."





"Eh? A-Ahhhh!" I never noticed that. That was the worst possible timing. I burrowed my head between my knees once more. But then, Mafuyu said something totally unexpected.

"Would you like to come to my house?"

Eh?

I wondered if my ears heard right. When I lifted my head, I could see Mafuyu's face flushed red. It was obvious from her trembling lips that she was trying her best not to shift her eyes away.

"Would you like to come to my house on my birthday? If..... Naomi's..... n-not busy with anything. If you want to."

"Eh? Ah, u-urm, yeah. I'll go. Really? Can I?"

I still find it unbelievable. Visiting Mafuyu's house? Then again, wouldn't Ebichiri be around? Will that be okay?

"Papa will be doing a rehearsal, so he will not be around."

And that was when Mafuyu finally succumb to embarrassment and turned her gaze towards the darkness of the night.

However, I could still see her burning cheeks despite the darkness.

"There's something..... I want to give to Naomi too. Something that cannot be carried around."

Something she wanted to give me?

And something that cannot be carried around?





My face felt like it was floating about like a crimson balloon. I couldn't really recall what we said after that. It was only when I checked my phone that I realized I had even typed in the time of the visit into that day's schedule.

"How did Mafuyu always manage to find Naomi?"

We bumped into Chiaki just as we were walking down the stairs to make our way back to the practice room. It looked like she split up with Mafuyu to search for me.

"Because I heard the sounds of the bass."

Mafuyu explained softly. Now that she said it, she does have a pair of really sharp ears. It was no wonder she can find me despite me hiding at places where I will not normally go. Chiaki sulked, moved her sight from Mafuyu to me and slammed her fist into my stomach. Ouch.

"Whatever, let's go back pronto. We've not much time left! Senpai's still waiting."

Chiaki pulled me by my hand, while Mafuyu was pushing me from behind. I was forced to run along the corridor while hugging to the bass in my arms.





Chapter 6

Wax Figure, Bullets, Genes

For Mafuyu's present, I ended up asking Tetsurou for his assistance.

"<Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band>? Don't we have one in the storeroom? You're in charge of rock, so search through it properly."

It was after dinner. Tetsurou was lying down on the sofa like a Mafia boss, swirling the whiskey glass around as he chewed on dried shredded squid.

"Ah— mmm. Actually, I gave that to someone else."

I lifted my eyes to check the expression on Tetsurou's face as I tried my best to put on an apologetic face.

"Then head to the record store or something. You should be able to find one there."

"Urm, it has to be the vinyl record. The reason's complicated, I can't explain it. Also, I can't use the America or Japanese version. It has to be the original from Britain."

I lifted my eyes to sneak another peek at Tetsurou's face.





"So I thought I would not be able to get it even if I tried finding one at a second hand store. But if it's Tetsurou — you should be able to do something, right?"

"Look, that thing may cost you up to ten thousand yen, you know?"

"I do. Please, the only thing I can depend on now is the power of the industry's ruffian!"

"Oh, so Nao finally realizes the great things about being the industry's ruffian? So you know you should be respecting me? Great, I'll teach you some exercises that will get you on your way to become an industry ruffian right now!"

"Nope, I'll pass on that."

"Let's touch a little more on that. There are two major moves. Stretch out your arms wide—"

"There's no need for you to demonstrate it to me!" I slammed the switch to cut off the <[Turkish March](#)>.

"Are you sure it's okay for you to talk to me like that? I may decide not help you with the record, you know?"

"Ughhh....." It sucked to owe a favor to the worst possible person.

"Whatever. So long as you genuflect before the powers of my personal antenna."

With that said, Tetsurou actually managed to get his hands on <Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band> the very next day. I got it way before Mafuyu's birthday. No need to worry at all.





"Well then, how will Nao show his respect for me? Oh boy, I can't wait—"

Grinned Tetsurou as he danced around with the record in his hand. Are you an elementary school kid or something? I swallowed the thought and tried to nurture the minute amounts of gratitude within me. I said,

"..... I guess we'll have sukiyaki for today."

"Matsusaka beef? Or Kobe?"

"Get your ass to work if you want beef like that!"

But Australian beef was enough to get Tetsurou to tear up. I have it easy with a father who was easy to please. I mean, it was all down to the chef when it came to food.

I hid myself in my room after dinner. I might be acting with undue haste, but I wrapped the record carefully with wrapping paper and even bound it with a ribbon. I laid on my bed and buried my face in the pillow in embarrassment when I imagined the scene where I handed Mafuyu the present. Crap. Could I remain composed? And I had to visit Mafuyu's house too.

A girl inviting me to her house — I did visit Chiaki's room several times before, but if you remove her from the equation, it was my first time experiencing that. What to do?

"You want me to mimic Ebisawa Mafuyu for your imaginary practice? I'm great at mimicking people's voices."

"Get the hell out!"





Asked Tetsurou, who popped his head through the door and into the room. I tossed the pillow at him to chase him away.

Kagurazaka-senpai did not show up at the morning practice the following day. That was the first time she missed a practice since the school festival. The remaining three of us had no option but to practice by ourselves until the lessons start, but she did not appear even after the preparatory bell rang.

"Audition's coming up soon. Perhaps she's busy running about in preparation for that," suggested Chiaki. I see. Senpai may be planning something yet again.

"We'll not be able to decide on the guitar's arrangements for the strings' part without Senpai....."

"But Mafu-Mafu's guitar solo made me shiver. Play like you did earlier for our actual performance too."

Said Chiaki as she turned her head around just as Mafuyu was packing her Stratocaster into her guitar case. Mafuyu widened her eyes.

"..... That was because Kyouko was not around, so I played the vocalist's part in her stead....."

Murmured Mafuyu shyly. I felt the same way as Chiaki did as well. We had already decided on the last piece for our performance — John Lennon's <[Happy Xmas](#)>. Since Senpai was absent, Mafuyu played the melody of the lead vocal instead. It was a vivid and





commanding solo. A performance that Chiaki and I will never forget.

"It will definitely be cool if you join in suddenly with your solo during the first chorus! All we need is Mafuyu's guitar and the synthesizer."

"But I only have two hands."

"Ah, you're right."

I gave Chiaki's suggestion a thought as well.

Just as its name suggested, <Happy Xmas> was sung by John Lennon, a melody that celebrated Christmas; on the other hand, the children were singing <War is Over>, a melody which yearns for peace. It was a song with two melodies sung together at the same time.

Mafuyu reproduced John Lennon's part with a solo, as though she was tossing the song into the air. It would be marvelous if we could combine that with the prayers of the audience, <War is Over>. All that would be left was the organs from the synthesizers.

The idea was gradually taking shape in my head as I tidied up the instruments.

I could almost hear the melody of the Christmas song from behind the closely shut door when we left the room. Chiaki locked the door up and looked into the sky as she rested her hand on the handle.

"..... If only we could be together forever."





Mafuyu and I turned around when we heard Chiaki's words. A faint smile appeared on Chiaki's face — one that would disappear in the blink of an eye. She continued,

"It will be great if we could clear the audition in a spectacular fashion and spend Christmas together."

Mafuyu looked at me hesitantly. She broke eye contact with me when our eyes met and turned her gaze towards Chiaki.

"..... Let's do our best," Mafuyu nodded with a soft murmur.

"Mmm..... At the very least, the four of us can be together."

Chiaki's smile was way lonelier than the skies of the early winter, but I could not say anything at all. It was time for our lessons — said Chiaki softly before breaking into a run.

The fourth lesson, physical education, ended. The guys were done changing and was on our way back from the sports complex to our classroom. Just then, a bicycle burst through the school gates at an incredible speed, catching the attention of many. Those braids were dancing in the air like the tail feathers of a bird. She disappeared between the buildings.

"..... That's atrociously late." "And she's wearing casual. With a mini-skirt to boot, even though it is winter." "The sight of her back and her long slender legs as she stood on the bicycle was just amazing."

Kagurazaka-senpai just reached the school.....? What on earth was she doing? I rushed back to my classroom, placed the bento





on Chiaki's desk and dashed to the practice room. The lunch bell rang when I reached the lawn at the back.

I froze on the spot when I opened the door to the practice room.

"Oh hi, young man. You're here early."

"Whoaaaaa!"







I crossed sight with Senpai, who was putting her arm through the sleeves of her blouse, and retracted myself backwards. Not only could I see her bra clearly, her skirt was unbuttoned as well. "S-Sorry!" I yelled and turned away.

"I can't close the door if you don't step in, you know?"

"Quit your nonsense and get dressed right now!" I roared angrily with my back against her. The giggles of Senpai were disrupted by the closing of the door. I took huge gulps of air as I rested my hands on my knees.

"You can come in now, young man."

Those words came from the opening of a ajar door. I walked in gullibly; what greeted my eyes were the creamy shoulders and smooth bare back of Senpai.

"— W-Why did you strip?"

I rushed out of the room in shock.

"I want to change into my victory underwear, so I thought I would get young man to help me with the hooks."

"Hook it yourself!"

"What a pity. I am done changing. Don't you worry, you can step in now."

Really? I mean, really? I opened the door a millimeter to check through the tiny opening. Senpai had even put on the uniform's coat, so I walked into the room.





"I was thinking it would not be a bad idea to seduce you openly once in a while, but it ended up as a failure, I guess."

What? I have no idea what you're talking about. In order to shake the image of Senpai's smooth skin away from my mind, I tried my hardest to turn my gaze away and focused my attention on setting up my bass. I did see her swimwear before, but it felt like a totally different matter altogether.

"I have been wondering for a while. Don't you have any sexual desire, young man?"

"What do y-y-you mean by that?"

"I am pretty confident about my back. Didn't you see it five times already? Aren't you the least bit excited?"

"I've seen it only twice!" What on earth is this person blabbering about?

"So you remember the actual amount. That makes me really happy."

Senpai flashed the beastly smile of hers, something that I had not seen in quite a while. I was forced to retreat to a corner. Senpai pressed her hands on both sides of my head to keep me from moving about.

"..... S-Senpai? You're acting strangely today. Anything wrong?"

"Mmm, something made me really sad. I actually went over to the organisers of the live Christmas performance just now."

"Oh."





"They've decided on the date of our auditions. It will be on next Saturday."

Saturday — I searched through my memory and heaved a sigh of relief. It was the day before Mafuyu's birthday.

"I hoped they would change the time. I even went down personally to negotiate, but it was all for naught."

"Urm..... Saturday's no good?"

"Rather than that, it's more like it has to be on Sunday."

"Eh?" Why?

"Comrade Ebisawa's birthday will fall on the next day, isn't it?"

I was shocked. I could not comprehend the meaning behind Senpai's words, so I remained stunned between Senpai's arms for a while.

"So I want our audition to crash with her birthday."

"..... W-Why?"

"You're asking me why?" Suddenly, Senpai pulled her face towards mine. The tip of our noses were almost in contact with each other. "What else but to prevent you two from celebrating her birthday by yourselves?"

"Wha....."





"I managed to hinder you two on Christmas Eve, but it looks like I've lost this time."

Christmas Eve? Did she just say Christmas Eve? So that meant our participation in the live performance was— I see, so Senpai did know of my plans to invite Mafuyu to that performance.

But why? What was going on here?

"You really have no idea, do you? You're so amazingly dense, it's actually quite touching to watch."

Smiled Senpai as she finally released me. My face was burning as though it was placed in a furnace.

"Alright. The reason is actually really simple, but I guess I'll start from the beginning so that I can express my feelings to your heart."

Senpai leaned against the wall and took out her Les Paul from its case. As for me, I rested my back against the wall and slid down onto the floor.

"I told you the reason I was born in this world. Do you still remember?"

I nodded. What was going on here? I could feel an unfathomable and scary attraction coming out from the revolutionary of love before me. The jet black guitar slung on her shoulder was like a deadly weapon which could gorge the heart out from a person without a single bit of harm being done to his body.

"I've no idea what you're thinking, but I do want to start a revolution in this world. Ever since the formation of capitalistic





economy, there are countless number of losers who died while on their quest to become the final revolutionary. With that said....."

Senpai sat on the desk and blinked.

"Why do you think those revolutionaries failed one after another?"

I cocked my head about two millimeters left and right.

"The reason is simple. They've all got the order wrong. You can't declare yourself as a revolutionary right from the start. The reason is because a fighter will die when his fame reaches the summit. It will be pointless if he turns to ashes after he was done spreading his words to the world. However—"

Senpai plugged the wire into the amplifiers. There was a *pa* sound when she turned on the power — just like the sound of a thick vein bursting apart.

"But John Lennon's different; he's the most successful revolutionary in history. He first became a musician, so he already had the attention of the world before his fight. Even if the world forgets the name of Mikhail Bakunin or Lev Trotsky, John's name will remain in everyone's heart. Why is that so? Fundamentally speaking, you cannot convey your feelings into the heart of others with just words alone. There are only two ways to really convey the words deep into their souls: bleeding, or spreading it via a song."

Senpai flicked on the switch of her Les Paul. A noise permeated through the practice room. It felt like I was in someone's heart right now.

"If they choose to spread their words by slicing away their life, then the revolutionaries will die before the wake of dawn. I can't do





something as stupid as that. What's the point of sacrificing your life in exchange for two, three quotes recorded in a huge tome of famous quotes? You have to sing if you really wish to change the world. Singing will bring me to the top, and I shall then say my words. I'll change this world like how I'd sculpture a wax figure with the warmth of my skin."

I could barely understand what Senpai was saying. But I understood something.

Senpai was bleeding right now.

It wasn't her words; the pain oozing out all over were hitting me in my heart. Why was this so? Why did she put on such a sorrowful expression?

"But I guess I'll probably die before I could achieve my dreams, just like how John Lennon was killed by four bullets. A king is helpless when it comes to evils and deaths even if he is at the top of the world..... Or rather, it's precisely because he is at the top of the world. However, I have an advantage which John doesn't have. What do you think that is?"

That was not really a question. It was just time for her to take a breather as she bewitched me with her eyes and a lick of her lips.

"It's my gender. I am a woman in love, get it? I can have a baby; I can ensure that the new life will not be harmed by bullets and give in my all to raise him. I will not allow my revolution to end in that manner. Even if my life comes to an end, my child can continue the march into the dawn of the new world."

Senpai rested her hand on the strings and looked up into the ceiling before giving out a sigh. The heavy atmosphere froze up the





air of the practice room. Senpai's fingers began to move all of the sudden. It was <[La Marseillaise](#)>. A song on the French revolution bathed in fresh blood.

"..... Well, that's the prologue."

"That's the prologue!? It's too damn long!"

The retort was the first thing I said when I could finally take a breath. Senpai gave a loud laugh.

"Now then, with the speech done and over with, it's about time I answer your doubt."

"By my doubt, you're referring to....." I had forgotten about it after listening to her long speech weakly.

"The reason I hindered you from celebrating Christmas Eve together with Mafuyu."

Ahh, yeah, that was right. I was dizzy from how the conversation topic was moved back onto me all of a sudden. However, I did my hardest to remain standing on my feet by propping myself up against the wall.

"Then again, it would be great if you can understand everything without me going on further."

"Nope, I don't get it at all."

"All that means I'll need a child who can inherit my ambitions. If so, he will require a father as well."

"Huh?"





"Do I really have to say things like 'Please be my husband' or 'I'll love to have your genes' to get you to understand me?"

I was speechless. I slumped onto the floor. As for Senpai, she took her Les Paul off her shoulder and closed in on me with a bewitching smile on her face—

"Eh? Ah, no, e-ehhhhhh?"

"Do you still think I'm kidding here, young man?"

But, because you.....!

Senpai knelt down before me and brought her face close to mine. She whispered into my ears.

"All these while, I should have expressed my love for you several times already."

It felt like my innards were doused by freezing alcohol. I browsed through my memories and recalled the words Senpai said to me before. But, why? That was—

"You know, young man. This is the first time I tasted such a comprehensive defeat ever since I was born. The man I love was stolen away by the girl I love, and the girl I love was about to be eaten up by the man I love. You don't have to say anything, young man. I might just cover your lips up should I hear your voice right now."

At a distance where a change in the angle of our faces would result in them coming into contact, Senpai's lips were adorned with these words.





"I long knew for whom the narrow space in your heart is reserved for. But even so, I had no option but to make my last stand. I'd rather not be born than to give up my love."

"U-Urm—"

"Therefore, I tried my hardest to prevent you and Comrade Ebisawa from having some alone time together. I ended up succeeding in one and failing in another. Simple isn't it? So now you understand how hard I tried to stop you two from getting together?"

Senpai flashed another calm smile. I should be the person who tried hard to stop her.

She was serious. She was definitely not lying here. Her feelings for me were real.

"With this, the friendship and trust that we once had between us — our normal friendship will burn and disappear into nothingness. It's a shame, but it can't be helped."

Disappear into nothingness.

Senpai and I could no longer be together like we did in the past again, as if nothing had happened.

Was that..... really it?

"That's right, this is what a confession of love means. What a scary thing it is. The rational fantasy people have on others will all be taken away gently by love. The only thing that is left between us are blades. Hey, young man. Have you ever wondered why I have





never once addressed you as my comrade despite pulling you forcibly into my revolutionary army?"

I held my breath.

You're asking me that at a time like this?

"There will come a day when you'll turn into my dear enemy. I knew that the first time I saw you."

The first time we met. That was when Kagurazaka-senpai was sitting on the roof of this practice room. Looking at me, captivating me. And I had already captivated Senpai's heart way, way before that.

"There is no need for you to reply to my feelings, young man. I do not wish to know."

"Why....."

"You're asking me why? I am but a woman in love when you strip the armor off my body. I do not wish to hear an answer that will sadden me. I am currently holding back to the desire to hug on you tightly and cry my heart out."

I saw no lies from her eyes that were staring intently at me.

"..... B-But, why..... me?"

Senpai pressed her finger gently against my lips to whisk away the rest of my words.

"Ninety percent of the world's happiness and misfortune would disappear if we could freely choose who we are in love with. And





there will be no one who will be in a relationship. Isn't that so? Comrade Aihara."

I could hear the scrapping sound against the wall. As I turned my head around, Senpai stood up in a flash, opened the door and stretched her hand outwards.

"There is no need for you to run. Come on in."

Said Senpai with an amused expression as she dragged a certain someone into the room with her hand. It was Chiaki. Her face turned even redder when she crossed sights with me.

Did she hear our conversation? The memory of me entering the room and closing the door..... it was all hazy. No, but.....

I could not say anything. I crouched against the wall and saw Senpai hugging Chiaki as she said something to her. Where was Mafuyu? She was not here, right? That was what I worried about — and it was the only thing I was clearly aware of amid the chaos in my head.

Mafuyu finally appeared halfway into our lunch break. Seemed like she took a trip to the infirmary first. She spoke very little — perhaps because she detected the tense, explosive atmosphere lingering about in the room.

My hand was totally unresponsive during our lunch break practice. Of course, there was no way I wouldn't know where I was facing and who I was exchanging gazes with. I was just praying hard for the bell to ring as I played several notes wrongly. Surprisingly though, it looked like everyone was about to hit their limits.





"Nao, enough is enough!" "You don't have to force yourself, young man—" "Stop playing if you're not in the mood to do so, Naomi!"

After an avalanche of words was a moment of silence. I could not reply to anyone or look at them in their eyes. I placed my bass away.

When school ended, the only thing I said to Chiaki and Mafuyu was, "Sorry, urm, I'm a little..... I am not attending our practice today." With that, I heaved the bass onto my back and left. My head was about to burst.





Chapter 7

Toolbox, Concrete, Battlefield

Tetsurou was not around when I reached home. It felt much colder indoors than outside. I put on a duffel coat and spaced out for a bit while laying on the sofa in the living room. My head had finally cooled itself down, so I recalled everything Senpai said to me earlier. I was calm enough to understand the bloodstained emotions hidden in the exaggerated speech by Kagurazaka-senpai.

When did it start?

When did Senpai start having feelings for me?

That was something that I could not question myself. Senpai has been saying this all these while, hasn't she? It was from the moment we met.

"Therefore, I had my eyes on you for a long time already, young man."

"— I want you."

"I guess I've finally found the Paul who belongs to me."

"It's actually very simple, young man. It's much simpler than what you're thinking."

Indeed. It was really simple.





I just did not notice it.

However, I had no idea what I should do, even if I had realized it. Audition was just around the corner. No wait, Senpai said the live performance and audition were arranged so that she could prevent Mafuyu and I from spending time together alone. That was just her mixing up her personal gains into work. Then again, that was the sort of person she was.

I curled myself up on the sofa. My back hurt. I felt something snap, and that was when I realized that the bass was crushed beneath my body. My face turned pale as I quickly pulled the instrument out of its case. Shit, what the heck was I doing? Was it okay? I checked the four knobs, the bridge and the pickup, heaving a sigh of relief when I was sure that I did not break anything.

I hugged the bass before my chest, pulled my feet up onto the sofa and curled myself up again. I should not be frustrating myself by thinking all these things at a time like this. Why did she bombard me with that lengthy speech of hers when we were in such a busy period of time? What should I do if Mafuyu were to know about this? I was clueless about how well the two girls got along with each other. Senpai teased Mafuyu all the time, and it looked like Mafuyu was not too against it either. However, the two girls would attack each other with a timbre that sounded like two cobras going for the each others' necks whenever they played together. You could call it the style of feketerigó, but the difference in the tones of the melody was incredibly obvious when the girls were playing. My bass was insufficient to carry the middle voice of the melody. I wished I could receive some assistance from the sounds of the synthesizer.





Hold on. Oi, now was not the time for me to be thinking about the band. That was just me running away from reality, wasn't it? I knocked my fist against the body of my bass. The thing that I should be worrying about at a time like this was—

Shouldn't I be worrying about the band at a time like this? Was I really okay?

I was disgusted by the various thoughts surfacing in my mind. The opposing guitar solos from Mafuyu and Senpai, along with the rhythmic phrases by Chiaki and me reverberating from afar — I was unable to stop them from awakening within my ears. I tried to construct the missing strings or organs from the song in my mind. Feketerigó lacks the fifth person, but the ideas were already there in my mind. It came to me when I was listening to Mafuyu's solo rendition of <[Happy Xmas](#)>.

The blueprint and program were gradually forming up in my head.

How ironic this was. The music was blocked out of my ears when we were practicing in the room as I was overly conscious of Senpai's gazes and the things she said. But here I was, all alone by myself in the house planning to think about the stuff Senpai said with a cooled head — and yet the music kept surging their way into my brain.

Simply put, I was subconsciously trying to find a place to hide.

The god of music will get angry if I kept running away from reality with music as an excuse. However, I had no option but to do so. It was the only place I could run to.

I stood up from the sofa.





I went back to my room, opened the cupboard and took out an old synthesizer and a toolbox. Looks like I'll have to spend my night like this. But I guess working on machines would be a much more productive way of spending the night as compared to watching the clock tick while I hid myself distressingly in my bed.

At the very least, it'll feel like I was moving forward.

"Did you not have any sleep? The dark circles beneath your eyes are really something!"

Asked Chiaki as she stared hard at my face. I answered by nodding my head while trying my hardest to hold back a yawn. My voice was slightly hoarse.

It was morning at the station platform. The sky was still dark as the sun was not out yet. However, the grayish concrete and Chiaki's checkered red skirt stung my eyes, since I stayed up all night.

"I couldn't sleep, so I worked till the morning."

I moved the heavy luggage from my shoulder to the floor. I brought the synthesizer along with my bass as well. My hand almost snapped from the weight.

"Something must have happened, right? But Senpai refused to say anything."

Chiaki's eyes were fixed onto me; they teared up gradually as she put on a sorrowful gaze. Two conflicting feelings flooded my heart. Thank goodness she did not say anything; why didn't she make





things easier by voicing it all out? I had no idea if I was nodding or shaking my head.

"Why is no one willing to disclose anything....."

Why was Chiaki so gentle with her words? I thought to myself. Why did she not ask me forcibly by making me "spew it out quickly"? That was how she used to be. It was what happened on the night when I was shaken up by Mafuyu and Yuri's <Kreutzer Sonata>.

However, this was not just my problem alone..... I could not tell Chiaki about it.

"Senpai said 'I love you, please embrace me' to you, right?"

I fell backwards and almost rolled into the tracks.

"Nao's just too easy to read," Chiaki laughed shyly.

"So you did h-hear everything?"

She heard Senpai asking me to embrace her..... or rather, words that were along that line, didn't she?

"I didn't hear that much, but I do know Senpai is in love with Nao right from the start."

"You knew about it all along?" I went all polite unconsciously.

"I should say everyone does. Even the girls in our class."

"Ehhhhhhhhhhhh?"





I squatted down next to the synthesizer. I might have fell flat on concrete from shock. Come to think of it, that should be the case. Kagurazaka-senpai's attitude towards me was clear as day right from the beginning.

"Forget it, I'm not surprised by this. It's normal for Nao not to realize this."

"Uhhh....."

I should just skip my lessons. I could not bring myself to face the rest of the world.

I came into contact with the synthesizer next to me.

But I can't do that.

Chiaki squatted down opposite of me, beside the synthesizer's case. It felt like I would be captured by those powerful eyes of hers should I lift my head up, so I kept staring at my hands instead.

"Just as I had expected, Senpai's really strong."

Chiaki murmured.

"Though I can't comprehend why she chose to say it with such a bad timing."

That was something..... I could not understand as well. Thanks to that, I was in tatters right now.

"..... That's something which I can't do. I should be shocked when I came to know of this."





Right. Chiaki loved Senpai as well. There was no way she could act like nothing happened.

"Urm, well, sorry."

"You have no right to apologize to me, so shut up."

I almost stumbled backwards onto the ground when Chiaki dissed me with a fierce smile on her face.

"I'm alright. I am not as strong as Senpai is, so a weird mechanism in my mind will kick in and ask me to take it easy so that everything will remain the same."

"..... Isn't that being strong?"

"That's being weak. This is too hard for Nao to comprehend. You'll probably understand nothing even if I explain it to you."

I remained silent when Chiaki pointed her finger at my nose. That may very well be the case.

One thing I was very certain of though; Chiaki's smile was lonelier than the cloudy dawn of early December.

"So, having skipped yesterday's practice and spent the whole night thinking, did you decide on what you are going to do?"

What I am going to do? Where should I escape to? What should I do from now on?

I nodded my head slowly.





"..... In theory, I modified the flanger so that it will only take in the note values from the synthesizer."

"Hold on a second, what are you talking about?"

"The arrangements, of course."

I rapped the synthesizer.

"I made this effect unit myself. It will connect Senpai and Mafuyu's guitars to the synthesizer and use the delayed effects as a backing. It'll adjust the tones as well."

Chiaki lifted her hips slightly in a dumbfounded state. She remained speechless for a while.

"Wh..... What's this? That's what you did without any sleep?"

"I can't help it."

I could create some breathing space if I was to direct all my attention to music. Therefore, I focused my consciousness and fingers onto the soldering iron, the screwdrivers and the pliers, burrowing myself in the modification work. I linked the effect unit, the bass and my computer to the synthesizer and modified the arrangements of the codes as I checked on the sounds repeatedly.

And this is my answer. The black box placed in the back pocket of the synthesizer case.

Chiaki burst into a laughing fit. It started with her hugging onto her stomach and bending forward, but when she heard my hesitant "Chiaki?", she covered her face with her hands and roared.





"..... Hold on, sorry..... Ahahahahaha, ha, Nao, you're really....."

"D-Did I say something strange?"

Chiaki shook her head as she held back her laughter. She wiped away the tears at the corner of her eyes.

"Now I'm the one who looks like an idiot. If only I can be like you."

No, I just pushed the problems aside for now....."

I will still see Senpai when I'm at school. I did not even know what expressions to put on when I see her. However, if it was music, then they will gush into the silence and fill it all up regardless of how hopeless the situation is.

An announcement signaled the arrival of the train, rushing past us as it came to a stop in front of the platform. It caused our hair to flutter in the air — that was the end of our conversation.

When we reached school, what surprised us was the fact that the keys to the practice room were nowhere to be found in the key box. There was someone earlier than us. Chiaki and I exchanged a look before making our way to the practice room located at the back of the school complex.

"How close were you and young man together? Something like this?"

"Eh? Ah, uh....."





"Did he place his arms around you? There's not much space there, isn't it?"

"Naomi would not do something like that....."

"But it's cold outside, so he should have at least done this, right?"

"Yaa! Kyouko, stop!"

"What are you two doing....."

I was speechless when I opened the door. Kagurazaka-senpai and Mafuyu were sitting together on tables placed together, with Senpai wrapping her arm around Mafuyu's waist. Looks like Senpai was harassing Mafuyu sexually.

"Geez, Senpai! Here I am wondering to myself why you're here so early today!"

Chiaki pushed me aside and dashed into the room. She then clamped her arms onto Senpai's neck to save Mafuyu. With her hair and uniform in a disheveled mess, Mafuyu hid herself behind Chiaki's back with a timid expression in her eyes.

"Because she and young man had their love talk at the water tower on the roof, so I am grilling her for the details. As the president of the club, how can I not keep myself updated on things like that?"

"That has nothing to do with you being the president, isn't it? And there is no need for you to remove your tie either."

"But everyone has forgotten about the fact that I love girls as well, so I took the opportunity to emphasize that once more."





It was okay even if you didn't emphasize it. Man, she was just..... I happened to exchange sights briefly with Mafuyu when she turned herself in my direction. Her face was dyed with the colors of the setting sun. I turned my gaze away on reflex.

I had already decided on the expressions and the things to say should I bump into Senpai or Mafuyu, but it looked like it was all for nothing. Who would have expected a scene of sexual harassment going on when I walked into the practice room? I heaved a sigh and laid the luggage against the wall.

"So you brought the synthesizer as well? Are you planning to do some arrangements? I was thinking of having a guitar showdown with Mafuyu. If so—"

Senpai leaned herself over and looked past my shoulders to the area my hands were at. She pressed her chest tightly against my back and rested her chin on my shoulder, causing my body to freeze while I was about to take the synthesizer out from its case. My body was stabbed by the painful glares of Mafuyu and Chiaki.

"Urm, well, I am going to take the synthesizer out. P-Please move away."

No one said a word while I installed the wires. Compared to the complicated installation and tuning of the synthesizers and effect units, they were much faster when it comes to the preparation of their instruments.

When I passed one of the connecting wires of the synthesizer to Senpai, she gave a gentle smile and said,

"Is this your answer?"





What? What did she mean by my answer?

The answer to the grand, unreserved and heart-bleeding confession Senpai made yesterday?

How was that possible? There was not a single word or thought I had in me which I could use to answer her. It was just that I had no idea what I should do to get things back to normal—

Senpai plugged the wire into her Les Paul without waiting for my reply. I still could not bring myself to look at Mafuyu when I passed her the wire, so I fixed my gaze on the control panel of the effect unit instead. The bars on the display sprang to life, a signal that the two guitars were connected to my machine.

"Chiaki, you start off with the high hats. Senpai, please join in during the second chorus. Mafuyu will perform solo for the first."

There was a silent and yet heated atmosphere in the room. I tapped against the body of the bass to begin the count down. Like the minute echoes of the bell reverberating in the snowing sky, Chiaki began the drumming of the faint beats.

I did not tell them the song which we will be playing. However, there was no need for me to. All we need was a breath and we were transported to the silent night of Christmas Eve, where the falling snow was about to cover up everything — be it the soldiers, trenches, corpses or the weapons.

As though she was exhaling the air out of her chest, Mafuyu's Stratocaster began to sing. *So this is Christmas and what have you done, Another year over, a new one just begun.....*

<[Happy Xmas](#)>.





The remnants of the beautifully decorated lines of the main melody led the clear hymns of the organs and began to spread. I could hear someone gulping. No one was touching the keyboard. It was done solely by the effect unit connected directly to Mafuyu's guitar, which located the harmony between her guitar and my bass.

It felt just as if there was another Mafuyu standing right here. I finally raised my head, but the illusion disappeared in an instant without a trace. On the other side of me was Chiaki behind the drums, playing the sounds of the falling snow; there was Mafuyu, her eyes lowered as she wove the song with her Stratocaster; Kagurazaka-senpai was there with her Les Paul held tightly in her hands, looking at the shattered fragments of the illusion together with me.

I crossed sight with Senpai. Her eyes glittered like melting snow. She gave the pick in her fingers a swift flick in the direction of her Les Paul, overlapping the whispering melody of Mafuyu's Stratocaster with a simple and powerful stroke. I could hear the children singing the prayers of peace. *War is over, if you want it, war is over, now.....*

I could feel a slight difference in the tone. The bright strings exploded. Goosebumps ran through my body. Was there really just four of us here? Was this the music created by just the heart and limbs of feketerigó? Even though none of us were making any sound, I could hear the voice of John Lennon and the chorus of thousands of children; I could even hear the bombings of the jet fighters, the explosions of the incendiary bombs, the cries of the orphans as well as the furious roars of the people.

Chiaki's fill0in came bursting in like a lightning which streaked through the night sky and dragged us all into a rock tempo. The





hymn broke free from John Lennon and the hands of the children. Supported by the wings of Kagurazaka-senpai and Mafuyu, it changed into a complex variation, spiraling at a dazzling speed as it climbed upwards. It dragged all the timbres from the synthesizer, shot its way into the sky of Christmas night and burst apart. Should I be a split second later with the entrance of my bass, the harmony would become distorted and fragmented, covering up the brilliant stars in the sky. The scattering particles of light were burning my body. I had to rely on the faint vibrations detectable only by the tips of my fingertips to pump blood continuously into the wings of feketerigó.

No one stopped.







And so, the thing that hindered Senpai and Mafuyu from going on and on for eternity was the bell which came from far away.

When I finally stopped my fingers in exhaustion, the night sky faded away. Chiaki's beats were slowing down considerably, while Senpai and Mafuyu's guitar were restraining each other as they stopped their singing and counted the lingering echoes made by their counterpart.

None of us spoke for a long time even after the end of the preparatory bell. The room was filled up by a comforting numbness.

"— This has to be our best yet, right?"

Murmured Senpai with heated breaths. Her eyes were wet.

"The auditions, the actual performance, and even places higher than that. It's all within sight, isn't it?"

I had no idea who started it, but we were all nodding our heads. Even the synthesizers and the effect unit as well — it felt like they were giving off an unsatisfied glow in reply.

As the volume of the amplifiers dropped step by step, the lingering heat finally slipped away from our body, and replacing them were the air of reality on our skin.

It was a really scary scene.

When I thought back on this, feketerigó then should have been torn apart into pieces already.





Even so, we were bounded tightly together by the machines I hooked up and the music. Despite the fact that I did not reply to Senpai's feelings, nor my own thoughts.

And that was my first mistake.





Chapter 8

Birthday

Before my eyes stood a large gate with spikes, conifers and tall metal railings on the sides. A large and elegant mansion stood deep inside, surrounded by a courtyard filled with flowerbeds.

I checked the time on my handphone. Four in the afternoon. Right on our agreed time.

The last time I visited the Ebisawa household was in the middle of summer. The courtyard now looked vastly different from how it was back then. The flowers were not around since it was December — I thought to myself as I stared at the lonely grassland. Just then, the two sharp dobermans laying on the turf sat up. They came dashing in my direction just as I was about to reach for the intercom at the pillar, causing me to retreat in fear.

The two dogs lay down at the other side of the gate and stared at me intently. They did not bark, nor did they flash their teeth. Did they actually remember me?

I walked forward timidly with that thought in mind, but they stood up once more.

"U-Urm, I am not a strange person," I somehow began explaining to the dogs. "I am just here to celebrate her birthday. Honest."





The dog to the right cocked its head suspiciously — did they somehow understand what I was saying? It looked like the dog to the left was observing me. Did I really look that suspicious? It was an incredibly grand mansion, and I heard that Mafuyu normally dressed up like a real lady, so I came in my suit to match myself to that. I approached the gate with two steps and squatted before the dogs as they continued to watch me.

"Do I look weird in this?"

"Not your clothes. But your actions, yes."

"Whoa!"

I sprang upward from the sudden voice next to me.

Standing beside me was a lady in a fitting light beige pantsuit. She came through the side door without me realizing it. I did not even hear the sound of footsteps.

Short hair, crisp facial contours and an icy gaze. The cute pair of dolphin earrings on her ears felt out of place. And it did nothing to tone down her sharpness. She is Matsumura Hitomi, the butler of the Ebisawa family who oversaw everything.

"Artur and Fricsay are pretty smart. They can distinguish different attires worn by us," said Miss Matsumura as she looked towards the two dogs, "But sadly, they cannot comprehend human speech. It is pointless to seek their opinions."

"Ah, no, it's nothing....." Someone saw that. She saw me. That was really embarrassing. "S-Sorry, I never expected you to receive me."





"No, I came out because I saw a suspicious person at the side of the gates."

She was as straightforward as ever.

"Ah, urm, it's been a while."

I could not think of anything to say. I stood up, dusted my knees and gave a bow. "Pardon me," said Miss Matsumura as she walked swiftly towards me and stretched her arms towards the collar of my coat. She adjusted my tie amid my flustering.

"Welcome. My mistress has been waiting for you."

Miss Matsumura opened the side door and walked into the courtyard while I was still rooted to the ground. The two dobermans moved their way obediently towards the side of the flowerbed after she gave them some pats and a few brief words. That was when I was granted access into the courtyard. The sequence of events looked really abrupt. How very horrifying.

"Mistress is still in an exhausted state. She practiced the piano for a long time right after returning home from the audition yesterday,"

Said Miss Matsumura who was three steps in front of me, causing me to flinch. I continued walking as I fixed my gaze onto my palms.

The audition yesterday. The burning sensation from the bass still stuck onto my hands, enough to cause my body to tremble. The metallic smell from the microphones and the damp atmosphere due to our breaths still lingered around me. We separated after giving it our all in the short period of time — yet she continued to practice the piano even after reaching home?





"I hope Mr. Hikawa will offer your assistance getting her to rest—"

"Naomi!"

A clear voice, one which sounded like the melting of the morning snows of winter, came towards me. I lifted my head.

It was a dazzling sight, be it the warm, golden hair or the pure white dress. Even her sapphire blue eyes were sparkling. Mafuyu's body was bathed in light as she came flying towards me.

However, she stopped in her tracks when she noticed my unreserved gaze.

"..... What's wrong?"

She tilted her head and looked at herself shyly.

"Eh, ah, no....."

I couldn't possibly tell her I was bewitched by her looks.

"..... I don't get to see you in this attire that often."

I hastily said those untruthful words. I had already seen Mafuyu in these elegant attires several times, be it on the CD covers, the magazines or the TV. Nothing new.

"Naomi's the one who is not in your typical attire."

Mafuyu tilted her head and took a good look at me from head to toe.





"It doesn't really suit you."

That was a huge blow. I almost slumped onto the grass.

"Ah, s-sorry. Urm, you looked much better than the time when you attended Papa's concert."

"Mistress, you're not making it any better by saying that."

Miss Matsumura's words gave the depressed me the critical blow.

"Mistress, it will be better if you are more careful with your words."

You are in no position to say that!

Stepping into the Ebisawa mansion for the very first time, I realized that the interior design was not as oppressive as it looked from the outside. I expected the house to be covered with woolen carpets and fur as deep as the ankles, chandeliers larger than a table, or Victorian vases huge enough for a child to hide inside. However, the corridors and the stairs were a huge let-down to what I had in mind. It felt like I was in a brand new art museum — a vast whiteness filled up my eyes, making me more and more restless. To add to that, the temperature indoors were almost as cold as the temperature outdoors.

Finally, I was led to a room that was about twice the size of a classroom, filled with curtains and woolen carpets in warm colors. To my left was a grand piano with its lid raised, and on the walls was a classy sound system that would put even Tetsurou in envy. The heaters of the room were switched on, that allowed me to finally remove my coat.





"..... Is this a music salon? Does your family hold family-concerts frequently?"

"No, this is my practice room."

I almost dropped the present in my hands onto the floor. This room alone was almost as huge as my house.

Just as I was looking about in a fluster, Miss Matsumura took my coat off my hands swiftly and hung it by the wall. She then led me to a chair. Next to the small, single-legged round desk was a stylish cream-colored tea table.

After Miss Matsumura left the room, Mafuyu sat on the chair diagonally before me and said softly,

"..... Thank you..... for coming over today....."

"M-Mmm."

I wanted to say something cool, but I could think of nothing despite contemplating for a solid five seconds with my fingers crossed.

It couldn't be helped. I brought up an uninteresting topic: yesterday's event.

"Are you okay yesterday? You couldn't even stand properly after the audition."

The audition was held at the scheduled venue, which was a club house. Unlike <Bright>, there was no smell of sweat — it was an avant-garde place, so spacious that my legs were slightly wobbly





just from standing on the stage. The other participants were leaning more towards the disco style. There were even dance groups as well. Naturally, we were one of the youngest groups there. As we were the last to hit the stage, we listened to the high-standard performances from the other groups while we trembled behind the stage.

However, Senpai remained unfazed. "We will score a landslide victory if they factor in the looks as well," said Senpai. How very confident of her. But when I saw the exhausted look that Mafuyu had at the end of our performance, my worry of whether we would pass the audition or not was thrown out of the window.

"Urm, is the solo for <Happy Xmas> too long? Mafuyu was playing by yourself for a full minute, and it looked like you were breathless by the end of that....."

Mafuyu took a deep breath and shook her head immediately.

"..... I'll work hard to last through the whole song."

No, please don't. A chill went down my spine as I recalled what Furukawa said. The thing about the burdens of her wrist, and how it was inconceivable for her to last through the whole performance.

"And I heard you practiced the piano after you reached home? Miss Matsumura—"

"That's because!" Mafuyu raised her voice to prevent me from going further. "..... Because you're coming today. I will not stop my practice just because I was tired from the audition."

Me? What does she mean when she said it was because I was coming?





"Whatever! It is my birthday today, so stop talking about things like that!"

"Ah, s-sorry."

Right. It was the rare occasion where we are celebrating her birthday alone by ourselves. I'll have to get on topic.

"Urm, congratulations..... how old are you?"

"Sixteen, of course."

Right. What sort of idiotic question am I asking her? Mafuyu quickly continued on, perhaps because she noticed how depressed I was.

"When is Naomi's birthday?"

"Fourth of April." I couldn't recall anyone celebrating it for me. In fact, there were even times when I forgot my own birthday. After all, it happens during the spring holidays.

"No one celebrates it with you?"

"Hmm. Maybe when I was still little. My parents might have bought me cakes or something. However, they split up before I was in elementary school."

"Ah..... s-sorry."

Mafuyu covered her mouth, her expressions became sullen. I shook my hands quickly.





"It's nothing, I don't mind. That's the way Tetsurou is anyway — it's more like a joke to me now."

"Let's celebrate Naomi's birthday together then."

"What are we celebrating here? A birthday that is eight months late.....?" I laughed. Then again, I said something similar to Chiaki as well, and I was scolded by her for that.

"..... We'll celebrate Naomi being the same age as I am. Naomi's already sixteen when we first met, aren't you?"

I shut my mouth and looked at Mafuyu's face.

The day when we first met. Did she even remember the date? The spring holidays marked our beginning. The junkyard where time grounded to a halt, hidden between the mountains next to the sea. Ravel's piano concerto was what brought us together. And here we are now, as time flew by.

Our hearts were stirred up by the memories. As we lowered our head shyly from the brief exchange in sight, we were interrupted by the sudden knocks on the door.

"I am here with some snacks and tea."

It was Miss Matsumura. She pushed a tall, sculptured, two-story metal trolley into the room. On the trolley were a long teapot, a basket full of freshly baked madeleines and an overflowing amount of soufflés.

"Wow..... smells great."





"The slightly deformed madeleines at this side were done by Mistress."

"Hitomi!"

Mafuyu stood up with a teary expression and quickly turned towards me with her face flushed red.

"B-Because I have never once stepped into the kitchen!"

Yeah, since she was a professional pianist. It would be trouble should anything happen to her fingers.

"I could not bring myself to watch on any longer, so I did the remaining half of the madeleines and all of the soufflés."

"Geez! Just go away, Hitomi! I'll brew the tea!"

A blushing Mafuyu stood up and chased Miss Matsumura out of the room.

"Well then, I will be at the office on the first floor. Please give a scream if anything should happen. Mr. Hikawa is a man after all."

"Whatever! Get out now!"

The two of us were left alone once more. "Well, urm....." Mafuyu began serving me tea despite her fluster. I was incredibly nervous as well. In the basket were what was said to be madeleines made by Mafuyu. Indeed. Four out of eight of the madeleines were in a rather peculiar shape.

"Urm, w-well, uhh, but....."





Mafuyu shook her hands in panic when she saw me grabbing the cakes made by her.

"You don't have to choose that deliberately! Urm, I do wish you can try it, but!"

"Don't worry, it's delicious. Really delicious."

Here I was, drinking afternoon tea with an all dressed-up Mafuyu in a rather out of this world room (and her's to boot) — how can anyone possibly remain calm after all that? However, having suffered from the preemptive embarrassment earlier, I managed to remain calm somehow. Moreover, I was not lying when I said the madeleines were delicious.

"I am hopeless when it comes to desserts. No one eats them either, since Tetsurou's boozing all day."

"That is the only thing I know how to do. Hitomi just taught me today."

"The kitchen should be in a mess....."

"It's not!"

No, sorry, I was just joking, really! Don't cry!

"You're so good at cooking, you'll never understand the feelings of those who are horrible at it."

Mumbled Mafuyu as she took a huge bite of the soufflé. What did she mean by that?





"You want to learn how to cook? But there's nothing good coming from that, you know? All you'll get is people ordering you around."

Mafuyu lifted her eyes to look at me. She nodded.

"..... Because Kyouko cannot cook."

"— Eh?"

My heart took a wild beat. Kagurazaka-senpai? Why did she bring her up?

"She can do just about everything, but she just cannot learn how to cook. There is nothing else I can beat her at."

That means..... wait, what does she mean by that? Beat her?

"Kyouko....." Mafuyu's face was burning red, her voice rose up all of the sudden. She then whimpered and continued, "s-she shouldn't be able to make desserts for you."

Eh? Ah, no, hold on. Mafuyu was staring at me with a serious look in her eyes. I swallowed the words that were at the edges of my mouth. Did Mafuyu know about that? About the things Kagurazaka-senpai said to me.

If that was the case, I will have to express myself properly to Mafuyu right now. With Mafuyu around, my feelings for Senpai — no wait, Mafuyu did not ask me anything about it, so it will be weird if I said things like that.

My brain was about to melt. And the words that came out of my mouth at a time like this was something so incredibly natural and obvious, it sounded silly.





"..... But Mafuyu still has the piano, no?"

Mafuyu's eyes opened wide. She then directed her gaze onto the teacups.

"But, if it's only the piano....."

"So long as I can listen to you playing the piano. Ah, no, the madeleines are great too. Mmm."

Mafuyu glared at me as she pouted her lips, causing me to swallow the rest of the words into my throat along with some tea.

Did I say something that upset her? Just as I was stuffing the fifth madeleine into my mouth in a clueless state, Mafuyu stood up all of the sudden.

After wiping her hands carefully with a wet towel, she turned towards me.

"This is my birthday present for you."

"Eh?"

"I'll give it to you right now."

I froze on the spot with the half-eaten madeleine in my hand, as if I was appearing on the cover of a CD. Mafuyu's white figure floated away from me. Her pure-white dress as well as her maroon long hair could be seen behind the gloomy piano with its black wings spread out wide. It felt like time would stop forever. Mafuyu's sapphire blue eyes were fixed onto me.





"..... Because we ran out of time back then."

It felt like Mafuyu's voice had waken me up from a long dream.

"I will play anything Naomi wants to hear."

I did not even notice the madeleine dropping into the teacup.

Mafuyu was about to play the piano for me. For me — and only me.

A present that she could not give me if I did not come to her house — could she be referring to this?

Crap, I was clueless about my current situation. What was the expression on my face? Was I about to stand up? Did I let out a weird smile? A strange, warm sensation came gushing up from beneath my abdomen, making me feel uneasy. Calm down. I tried my hardest to force myself back into the chair.

"And the first piece will be?"

"U-Urm....."

My voice shrunk back within me. I cleared my throat. What should I do? Was any piece fine? Really? Then I must choose something she did not release in her album. If only the orchestra is around, then I can get her to play the whole <Brandenburg concertos>. Or perhaps Mozart's <Piano Concerto No. 24> in C minor. No, that is not quite possible to do, but how about <Variations and Fugue on a Theme> by Handel? Is she good with the works from the early romantic era? Will the organ works by Bach be better? How about—

I came close to voicing my greedy desires a few times.





However, only one answer remained in my mouth.

The first song I hope Mafuyu will play for me has to be none other than this.

"..... Beethoven's Op. 81a."

Mafuyu flashed a faint smile when she heard my answer. But in the next instant, she faced herself towards the eighty-eight black and white keys, immersing her fingers, her wrists, her bones and her soul deeply into the icy monochrome world.

Her eyelashes lowered, her shoulders were swaying. I could not help but to stand up. I could see Mafuyu's slender fingers pressing onto the keys of a triad that symbolized goodbye.

Next came the whispers of the adagio.

Beethoven's Op. 81a. Piano Sonata No. 26 in E \flat major, also known as the <[Les Adieux sonata](#)>.

The first movement, where the friend left by riding on the allegro. With the train disappearing in the morning mist, the footsteps sounded so clear, but was filled with an indescribable sadness at the same time.

Why hasn't Mafuyu recorded this song before? I remembered she said that this is her most favorite piece out of all the pieces by Beethoven in a certain interview.

Was it because this is a song of goodbye? Would the story woven by Beethoven appear clearly before her eyes each time she played





this song, bringing her pain as the result? Or does she fear her fingers will stop before she can even reach the final movement?

However—

The reasons did not matter any more.

Mafuyu was currently playing <Les Adieux sonata>. The emotional andante wandered around aimlessly amid the grey gloominess as it counted the number of days without the other half. As it sought for the exit like a ray of light, the pitch increased gradually before it was finally released. The left and right hands were seeking each other from the beginning. Their sounds then clashed, before breaking into a dance of happiness from the reunion. What a clear, simple and yet powerful harmony.

As I closed my eyes, it felt like the insides of my face were about to ignite.

Could the sounds of the piano be so intense to the point where it felt like it could sear my skin, and yet be so sweet like an intoxicating rain of liquor? Strange. This wasn't the familiar sounds of the instrument which I had listened to over thousands of times. Was this really the piano? Could it be the chirps from the magical bird due to the painful caress of Mafuyu's fingers? I moved myself forward unconsciously, attracted by the luster of the black wing.

Mafuyu hammered the final chord of the E \flat major. She waited until the final remaining sound permeated itself into the air before lifting her fingers.

"..... Naomi?"





I jumped in surprise from her call. Somehow, I was already leaning onto the side of the piano, my eyes fixed onto the keyboard.

"..... Ah."

"Anything wrong? You don't like it?"

I shook my head hard.

"How can that be? Just, how do I put it? In any case, it was amazing. Urm....."

I couldn't speak. The genes of a music critic which I had inherited were laid bare for Mafuyu to see.

"What will the next song be?"

"Urm....." It felt like my heart was right next to my ear — I could hear the thumping of my heart.

"W-What should I choose? I guess Bach will be the best. Well then, urm, <[Partita No.2](#)> in C minor."

Mafuyu nodded. Each time I said the title of a song, Mafuyu would head towards the mysterious, pitch black and ivory world. It was a little saddening, but the songs which she wove there would captivate me again and again, preventing me from escaping. It started with a viscous question, followed by the confirmation in what felt like a repeated stampede on the frost and snow, before ending off with a fugue that expanded outwards in the brilliant sky and beneath the waters.

Ahh, that was—





It was that unique piano. I finally understood.

It was that piano. There was no mistake. From the fugue, I could hear the smell of the tides drifting in my direction. I could also hear the sounds of the gentle breeze rustling against the leaves. Also, there was the sound of the rusty bicycle wheel spinning in the air as well as the drops of rain knocking against the door of the fridge.

<Well-Tempered Clavier>, <The Art of Fugue>, <The Musical Offering> as well as <Goldberg Variations>. I could no longer differentiate which were the songs requested by me, and which of those were played by Mafuyu on a whim.

Mafuyu, who had been playing the piano silently all these while, finally rested her hands on her knees and heaved a heated breath towards the ceiling. The drops of sweat on her face were glittering in the light.

From that gesture of hers, it looked like she was praying. I hesitated, wondering if I should call out to her.

Was it due to the exhaustion from those excessive practices? It looked like she was twisting her skinny body during the ending stretches of her playing. It was painful to watch.

A light smile appeared at the edges of Mafuyu's mouth. She slowly fixed her gaze onto my face.

"Hey, that piano."

Mafuyu's gaze blurred when I spoke, as though she was in a dream-like trance. She tilted her head slightly.

"Is that..... the piano at the junkyard?"





Mafuyu leaned towards me happily.

"You can tell from listening?"

"Yeah, because....." It was impossible for those sounds to be anything else. I've already heard it twice, and there is no way I'll ever forget it.

However, Mafuyu shook her head instead.

"..... That piano was Mama's."

I took in a deep breath.

"Hitomi moved it secretly to the villa for me, but Papa saw it when he came back to Japan, and he threw it away in anger. But I still visited Mama's piano for quite a number of times."

And that was how we met. The department store located between the valleys at the ends of the world.

"I could not go there frequently when I entered high school. Moreover, it could no longer be played due to the damages sustained from the rains, so I gave up in the end. However, Papa brought this piano for me not long ago."

Ebichiri did?

"The way I press the keys is really similar to the way Mama did. Mama's piano was custom made, and the keys were made really light. So Papa asked Yamaha to make an exact replica of the piano for me."





Mafuyu lovingly caressed the golden manufacturer's name carved above the keyboard.

"I really do not understand what is going on in his head. He is the one who threw it away, but he ordered another one to be made."

I thought I could understand it a little.

Perhaps he gave his forgiveness some time ago. Not to his wife who separated from him, but to himself.

"This is inconceivable. I never thought I will have a chance to get it back."

The same piano as her mother's. The item Mafuyu yearned to get back.

It was probably because it was Mafuyu's heartfelt desire.

"..... Magic exists at that place, you know?"

"Magic? What?"

Mafuyu's locked her widened round eyes onto me and questioned me in seriousness. I became shy all of the sudden.

"Urm, nothing."

"How can that possibly be? Explain properly."

Mafuyu's eyes grew serious all of the sudden. I was forced to tell the truth as she pressed me further — the name I secretly came up with for the junkyard.





"The Department Store of Hearts' Desires."

"..... Why did you name it as that?"

"Why do you want to know....."

"Because it is a good name."

I could not help but to turn my gaze away. I was proud to receive her praise, but sadly it was a name which I borrowed from somewhere.

"Have you heard of the novel <Norstrilia>?"

Mafuyu shook her head. Right. It was not a novel one would normally read.

"It's a name found in that novel. If you can find your heartfelt desire, then that place will fulfill it for you regardless of what it is."

It was a book I read when I was young, so I could not quite remember the detailed contents — just a few names here and there. I remember it's a story about a youngster named Rod McBan, who finally got his hands on the collectors postage stamps and returned.

"Did you gave it that name because you are always there to get your spare parts?"

"Mmm, you're not wrong. I could fix almost anything that is broken so long as I make a trip to that place."

Mafuyu's eyes were sparkling as she looked at me. I could almost hear the howls of the wind located in my memories.





"Well then, did you find it? Your real desire."

The heartfelt desire.

"..... I don't know."

"I've already found mine."

Mafuyu's desire?

Neither of us could ask the questions which followed after.

Because that was the place where we met. However, the fairy tale way of thought was not practical. Mafuyu's cheeks burned like the flames of a heater just from a brief exchange in our gazes. If I had said something, then perhaps the distance between Mafuyu's hands, whose fingers that were placed gently on the keyboard, and my hands, with wings sprouted on them, would gradually close down to zero—

A shadow appeared on Mafuyu's face.

Were those eyes, which looked like the deep seas, trying to tell me something? It felt like my heart was gripped hard by something when I was about to question her, so I heaved a slow sigh instead.

"..... Well," the dry sigh finally transformed itself into my voice. "There's a present..... I'd like to give you as well."

For a moment, I thought Mafuyu would burst out in tears. However, she just lowered her eyes and nodded her head gently instead. I almost apologized to her.





I took the bag from beneath my coat.

When I passed her the wrapped present, I could see Mafuyu's watery eyes alternating between the ribbon and my hands.

"..... Can I open this?"

"Mmm, Urm, well, I'll like to introduce you to your present as well."

Mafuyu shot a surprised look at me. She then undid the ribbon and removed the wrapping. Her eyes widened when she saw the crimson jacket of the record.

"Sorry for how worn out it is. I could only get my hands on a second hand one."

"It's okay..... I have never once listened to a full album of The Beatles."

"Do you have a player?"

Mafuyu nodded and led me to the sounds system at the side of the wall. She placed the black, round record into an aged but solid player and lowered the needle.

The cheers and applause of the audience came from the speakers as we sat ourselves down on the sofa. Mafuyu placed the jacket, which had a [wildly colourful group image](#) printed on it, on her knees. As she looked at the jacket, she asked,

"Is this a live recording of a concert?"

"Nope. It's a studio recording."





What broke the cheers apart were the resolute beats and the guitar riffs.

"Back then, The Beatles were already worldwide superstars. They were surrounded by ardent fans and chased around by the media wherever they went, so they gradually became tired of the thought of a concert."

Paul McCartney finally began to sing. Crooning about the fictitious story about the roots of their music.

"However, they still love performing live. It's to be expected since they were a rock band. Therefore, they created a fictitious band and created a setting where it was the recording on the live performance of the band. And thus this record was created."

-Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.

A fictitious name entrusted with their dreams. It was the name of the album, as well as the name of the first and last track in it.

Mafuyu sat next to me silently, allowing her body to sink into the sofa as she listened to Ringo Starr's voice which came after Paul's. The mike was finally passed to John Lennon. The brass section, orchestra, harpsichord, sitar..... the lively instruments which could not possibly be accommodated on a real stage had all appeared in the fictitious stage and within the rock music.

I left my seat only once, and that was to flipped the record over to the "B" side. I didn't think Mafuyu even noticed when I returned back to her side.





The live gig was about to end. Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band turned their ending speech into a song. An impromptu performance, but sadly, it was about time for us to part.....

The song ended. The thundering cheers gradually died down. They were replaced quietly by the strums of the guitar and the piano which came in shortly after.

Somehow, I will always tear up when it reaches this part. Till this very day, I still cannot understand which part of the intro touches me.

Encore, <[A Day in the Life](#)>.

Body warmth came from the back of my hand.

They came from Mafuyu's fingers. She was playing on the back of my hand the same melody as the piano in the song.

Finally, the orchestra went into a crescendo. All instruments started off from the lowest note to the highest note, ignoring the clashing and grazing of the disharmony. It kept climbing and scaling upwards in their search for the light, even prying the clouds apart—

Shatter.

The harmony from the simultaneous strikes of the three pianos created a buzzing echo. The shattered fragments scattered across the surface of the sea.

Our hands folded together as we listened to the dying moments. Despite the fact that the sounds of the piano was totally sucked up





by the air, the record did not end there. I could clearly hear the sound of footsteps and the scrapping of the chair against the floor.

Then, the silence was suddenly interrupted; not by a song or our words, but a rewinding sound. Mafuyu's hair flinched. She grabbed onto my hand tightly.

"..... W-What is this?"

A melody loitering on the brink of existence, with a few voices played in reverse at the same time. The short verse repeated itself endlessly.

"Urm, this is called <[Sgt Pepper's Inner Groove](#)>. The inner groove of the record creates a repeating loop. The record will keep playing if you do not stop the player."

Thank god the record player in Mafuyu's house was an older model — I secretly heaved a sigh of relief. Also, I thanked Tetsurou silently for locating another UK version of the vinyl record.

The records released by the US or Japan either ignored that feature, or it will not play repeatedly forever. Of course, the track in the CD version will simply fade away.

It has to be the UK version of the vinyl record.

"Why did they design it like this?"

Asked Mafuyu while she looked at the record uneasily.

It felt a little embarrassing to reply to that with an answer prepared in advance. No no, then what was the purpose for me to ask Tetsurou beforehand? I have to answer her properly.





My gaze fell onto the jacket — onto John, who was wearing a military band uniform and carrying a horn. I chose the appropriate words slowly.

"Urm, this is probably a prank by them. The Beatles loved to tease their audiences. They were probably saying 'It's over', but....."

I shifted my eyes to the tiny hand of Mafuyu that was resting on top of mine.

"Perhaps they actually did not want the fictitious concert to end. That's how I feel anyway."

I could feel Mafuyu's large eyes fixed on my cheeks.

"That's why I decided to give Mafuyu this record as your birthday present."

The concert will never end if she does not lift up the needle.

A dream that could never be fulfilled in real life.

I sneaked a peek at Mafuyu when I was done with my explanation, came into eye contact with Mafuyu. Both of us lowered our eyes shyly to our overlapping hands.







Mafuyu gave an inaudible shriek and stood up with her face flushed red. She hid her right hand, which was originally placed above my hand, behind her back and shook her head as she stepped backwards.

"Sorry, urm....."

"I'll switch the player off."

Mafuyu ran towards the sound system, the hem of her dress fluttering around her. She lifted the needle up. <Inner Groove> came to a startling halt, destroying eternity. An awkward silence lingered between the two of us. After slotting the record back into its jacket, Mafuyu returned back to the sofa with the record hugged before her chest. I was feeling a little uneasy. Did I make her happy?

"I thought..... I heard something just now."

I tilted my head.

"Well, I thought I heard an incredibly high-pitched sound prior to the repeating voices."

I was dumbfounded from surprise.

"..... R-Really? Well, you are not wrong."

That was one of the childish pranks by The Beatles. Prior to the <Inner Groove>, they inserted a high-frequency tone which is supposed to be audible only to the dogs. She could hear that?

"Dogs? Why?"





"No idea. A joke of some sort, perhaps."

"Ah, perhaps because it is the band of Constable Pepper? That may be the dog whistle which summons the police dog."

Mafuyu's sounded a little hoarse. She was flipping the record around as she looked at it intently. I see, that was something which never came to me. No wait, he was a sergeant, not a constable, yeah?

"There are plenty of fun stuff on the cover as well. You can even see the arm badge and insignia of Sgt. Pepper. There's that fake beard as well."

When I drew out the cover, a simple and yet colourful print came into Mafuyu's view. A child-like smile appeared on Mafuyu's face. She must be really happy, right?

Finally, Mafuyu placed the cover back in place and hugged it tightly before her chest once more.

"..... I'll"

"Eh?"

"I'll listen to it again later. Over and over again."

"Ah, oh, mmm."

"Thank you. I'm happy, really happy. Really really happy."

"M-Mmm, I know."

Mafuyu hugged the record and sat down next to me.





She was even closer to me than before, her shoulder coming into contact with mine. I could not shift the angle of my upper body.

Thank goodness, she looked elated. Having walked between the realms of nervousness and ease repeatedly, it felt like the bones in my body were about to shatter apart.

"Naomi, why....."

Mafuyu was murmuring next to my ears. The only thing I could do was to turn my face slightly towards her.

"Why do you always know what I want in an instant when it comes to music?"

W-was that so?

"But why do you not understand the thing that I really desire?"

I can't look, I'll get sucked in by her — I still turned my head around despite that thought of mine. I was immediately held captive by Mafuyu's deep blue eyes that were only about fifteen centimeters away from me.

What she really desires, huh.

Why? I knew all I had to do was to convert my answer into words, but I was unable to make a sound. I lacked the courage. It was just the end to the music. And yet I could not breathe.

I only had to convert them into words.





But somehow, Kagurazaka-senpai's words awakened in my mind at this very instant.

"This is what a confession of love means. What a scary thing it is."

"The rational fantasy people have on others will all be taken away gently by love."

It felt horrible just by imagining how I could no longer sit next to Mafuyu like how I would normally do if I were to say it all out. Isn't that something really scary?

We could interact with each other like what we are doing now if I chose to remain silent. Should I confess, then all that will be left between us are blades.

Moreover, I have not given Senpai a proper reply yet. Senpai did say she does not want to hear my answer, but that was not the point. There is no way I could say the same things to another girl without giving her any reply. I could not do it.

No, but I have to. Mafuyu's eyes were clouded by a sorrowful expression. I do not want her to put on this expressions any more. I have to say it.

Just as I was about to open my mouth—

A shrill guitar riff came between Mafuyu and I. I sprang up in shock. With her hand flung away by my action, Mafuyu prevented herself from falling off by gripping onto the sofa.

"Ah, s-sorry!"





It was my handphone. And the incoming ringtone <Revolution> means—

I remembered stuffing the phone into the pocket of my coat, so I rushed to the wall.

"Hi, young man. Sorry for interrupting, but I made the call since I have something important to tell you. Then again, I'll make this call regardless anyway."

On the other side of the phone was Kagurazaka-senpai musing away. I pressed my hand against the wall and lowered my head in dejection.

"Anything of importance?"

I could feel Mafuyu's eyes behind me. For some reason, I unconsciously turned my body around to block her from the sight of my phone and lowered my voice.

"I have a good news and a bad one. Which will you prefer first?"

I gave a sigh. It was a question I had heard from her countless times ever since I met her.

"Anything's fine. It should be roughly the same thing."

Senpai went silent for a while. Did I manage to surprise her? Damn, this felt so great.

"You are gradually metamorphosizing into a man of my preferences. Why is that so? You'll turn into an ordinary suave guy should you remove the problem of your denseness. Stop making my heart skip a beat."





"No no, what are you talking about?" Mafuyu's right behind me! I doubt she could hear the conversation through the phone, but she does possess a pair of incredibly sharp ears!

"In any case, it's like what you've said. We got through the auditions. I never expect the results to be out so soon. Hope it will be the best Christmas Eve yet."

I adjusted my grip on the phone.

We passed the audition. The good and bad news.

"..... H-How's this a....." I tried my best to hold on. "So what's the bad news?"

"Your voice is trembling. That's really cute as well," Senpai giggled. "Well then, please pass this message to Comrade Ebisawa behind you. Should you two step over the line today, that will mean that I have kissed young man indirectly as well. Please remember that."

"Kyouko~!" Mafuyu gave a furious shriek. It looked like she actually heard us. The call disconnected. Mafuyu hammered me hard on my back with her face and ears burning red. I was at my limits as well, so I could not look at Mafuyu properly in her face.

That ended up with me missing the chance to say those important words.

And that was my second mistake.





Chapter 9

Spring, Glass Hand

I reached home about eight at night. When I opened the front door, I was immediately greeted by an earth-shaking [<Tarantelle> by Chopin](#) that was coming from the depths of the dark corridor, along with Tetsurou's weird singing.

"Meat, meat, veggies! Meat, meat, veggies!"

"What the hell are you doing....."

Tetsurou was circling the steaming hotpot and dancing like a lunatic with a bowl and a pair of chopsticks in his hand. His face turned green when he noticed my presence.

"Hah? Hold on, Nao. Why are you back home?"

"I am currently residing in this house," I went all polite for some unknown reason.

I switched off the CD and took a glance at the contents of the pot. The meat was bubbling inside the gas stove hotpot. At the side of the hotpot was what looked like a plate of really expensive marbled beef.

"No, you see, I thought Nao would not be home, so I was thinking I should enjoy the only dish which I know how to cook."





"What's the price of this beef? Per gram?"

"Six hundr..... Hold on, Nao! I'm sorry!"

"Do you know about the financial situation of our house right now?"
I had the urge to slam Tetsurou's head into the hotpot, but I changed my mind at the very last moment.

"It's important to reward yourself occasionally, Nao."

"But Tetsurou has done nothing worth rewarding, have you!? And all you have here are meat and beer — you can't even call this a dinner!"

"Yeah, that's the reason why I was doing the veggie dance which I invented. Thirty minutes of that will net you about sixty lemons worth of vitamins."

I really wanted to grab some cabbage or tomatoes from the fridge and stuff them into his mouth, but that would be a waste. Forget it.

"You want some? It's everyone's favourite Tetsurou-styled sukiyaki, made personally by yours truly — though there's only beer, soy sauce and meat! Simple and yet delicious!"

"Nope. I'm not hungry....."

I removed my coat weakly. It was not just due to the snacks I had in the afternoon. Lots of things happened today — the conversation with Mafuyu, listening to Mafuyu playing the piano..... I was filled right up to my chest.

And then there was that beautiful finish from Kagurazaka-senpai. I gave a sigh, removed my tie and sank myself into the sofa.





The four of us would be spending Christmas together. That was final.

But I am truthfully happy about that. We are getting on yet another stage that was even higher. And it was just like what Senpai had said before: this time, it would be a night without the support from the audience. We cannot afford to make the slightest mistake.

The problem was, could we really make it past the practice and into the stage with our current chaotic states of mind? It was not like Kagurazaka-senpai had let it all go or something; instead, it felt more like she was impervious to that explosive confession she had made..... And it was the three people by her side who were way more fidgety instead.

Did Mafuyu know about the confession that Senpai made? Ahhh, I should have asked her earlier today — no, that was impossible. There was no way I could do so in that situation.

The problem was, I did like Kagurazaka-senpai as well. No, I mean, well, I have been under her care all this while. She was always there to push me from behind and led us forward in a very dependable manner. I was happy about Senpai's feelings for me, but there was no way I can reciprocate her feelings as I had Mafuyu in my heart.

I did want to tell Senpai that, but she avoided it simply with a "I understand, you don't have to take it to heart" look in her eyes. We even managed to make it through the auditions despite the ambiguous situation which we were in all this while. Kind of impressive, if I must say.





No—.

I can't drag this on any longer.

I couldn't say it because I was so damn useless.

Today too. I couldn't tell Mafuyu the things that mattered. What was the reason I visited her house in the first place? This was just shameful of me.

"So you ran back here just like that? There's a sofa there, no? All you had to do was to push her down onto the sofa, isn't it? You wuss."

"No, that's something..... What the heck are you talking about, Tetsurou!?"

I threw a cushion in the direction of Tetsurou, who was walking into the living room with a can of beer in his hand.

"Those marbled beef was just heavenly. Now then, I'll have these strawberry-flavoured reports as my dessert. Which hand did you place on her shoulder?"

"Please, just get back to your work."

Tetsurou grumbled unhappily as he opened up his laptop and sat on the sofa opposite of me. I went back to my room to change into my home wear. My shoulders were sore from the suit due to my unease wearing them.

Just then, I remembered about the cassette tape in the pocket of my suit. Mafuyu passed that to me just as I was about to leave her house. It was the final present for the day.





Then again, I could not listen to it in my room. Can't be helped, I'll have to go back to the living room.

"Tetsurou, mind if I play a cassette tape?"

"Oh man, did you actually record those mushy words between you two?"

"Shut the hell up and get the hell away!"

There was nothing soft near me, so I grabbed the DVD case and threw it in the direction of Tetsurou without hesitation.

I returned back to the sofa after pressing the play button. Some background noise, then the voice of the producer or recorder or something. Next was the lively melody of the violin, and supporting it was the simple arpeggio from the piano.

Tetsurou lifted his head above the screen of his laptop.

"..... You got your hands on the sample tape?"

"Mmm."

"I see. Hmm, she's on par with Julien Flaubert even though she has not played for a long while."

Well, he's still a music critique regardless of how useless he was. He could tell straight away.

It was Mafuyu's comeback album, performed together with Yuri. She passed the sample tape to me. It was Beethoven's <[Violin Sonata No. 5 in F Major](#)> - or more often known as <[Spring](#)> -





and is typically paired up with <[Kreutzer](#)>. It is the most commonly seen combination, and the two pieces will probably be included in the album.

Rather than the smooth-flowing piece, I'd very much prefer to listen to the intense arguments between the two in <Kreutzer> or <[Violin Sonata No. 7 in C minor](#)> — I thought to myself as I cocked my ears to listened to the exchange of the crisp and clear melody in F major.

Something felt off when I reached the third movement, the Scherzo.

"..... Weird?"

"Hey, what are you doing, Nao? Don't reverse the tape!"

"Urm, sorry, I want to listen to it once more."

I reversed the tape back to the start of the third movement and placed it once more. The strange feeling I had was gradually taking shape.

It was the same for the last movement as well. However, it was not too noticeable if it was from a slow moving piece like <Spring>. I forwarded the tape to the next piece.

An abrupt bursts of the chord in A Major. So the second piece is indeed <Kreutzer>. This should be enough to confirm my doubts. I sat before the sound box and focused my attention on the tarantella in the final movement played by Yuri and Mafuyu.

"..... What's wrong, Nao?"





"Eh? Ah, nothing."

Was it just my imagination? I rewound the tape back to the middle portion of the tarantella.

"..... The way Mafuyu strikes the keys with her right hand..... Doesn't it feel like something's not quite right?"

Tetsurou tilted his head and gave it a thought. So it was just my imagination? But the strange feeling was way more intense than what I felt during <Spring>.

"It's even more obvious towards the later movements. Like the way she pressed the keys down forcefully after striking the key."

What's this? It's just like..... Yes—

It was like she's using the force of her shoulders to assert strength on her fingers in order to compensate for the lack of strength in her wrist. The transfer of the force was delayed, thus resulting in the murkiness of the sounds.

I shivered.

Tetsurou sat on the floor, shuffled his way next to me and pressed himself against the sound box. We rewound the tape and replayed it once more.

"You're right. Some of the notes sounded sticky towards the end of the piece."

No, that was not it. That was not the main thing. There was something more important than that.





"Hey, you've got the better pair of ears, Nao. You sure about this? Is it really only from her right hand?"

I nodded as Tetsurou shook me by my shoulders. It was just her right hand.

That glass-like right hand of Mafuyu.

Why was this happening?

She played quite a few pieces for me today right before my eyes, but I did not notice anything out of place back then.

No..... hold on a second. All of the songs I heard today were Bach's compositions other than <Les Adieux sonata>, and they were all piano pieces that were around three minutes in length. She took rests in between the pieces as well.

However, the pieces recorded in the tape are songs by Beethoven. The movements of <Kreutzer> were all very long. Moreover, Mafuyu did not play solo. It was a duet with Yuri. She did not have the option of playing at her own pace.

So, that was what caused..... a relapse of her injury?

"I'm surprised you noticed something like that."

Tetsurou shook his head and stood up.

"I better give Ebichiri a call. Just in case."

"Eh? Ah, w-wait."

"What?"





I myself had no idea why I stopped Tetsurou.

"What if it is a relapse? Better safe than sorry."

A relapse. I gulped. No, but that was caused by psychological issues. There should be nothing that is restraining Mafuyu's fingers right now.

I then recalled the words of Furukawa. She was putting way too much strain on her wrist. If she used the strenuous way of playing the guitar, and coupled that with an increasing amount of piano practices, then it might not be a relapse — not a psychological issue. But a possibility that is way more cruel.

In any case, I should ask Mafuyu first. It'll be great if everything was fine.

However, Tetsurou had already made the call while I was entangled in my chaotic thoughts. The conversation ended quickly though.

"Ebichiri's not around, so I asked Matsumura to pass the message instead."

Oh yeah, Ebichiri was not in. I heaved a sigh of relief. I guess it was better not to let Ebichiri know? It must have been my mistake. I rewound the tape once more. Would I realize it was just all an illusion of mine if I turned the volume down? I pressed the play button with that naive thought in mind.

However, there was no way I could erase that strange feeling after noticing its presence.





"Well then, even though Comrade Ebisawa is not here yet, let us have a toast. Please raise your cup."

It was the next day, and that was what Kagurazaka-senpai, the earliest member to reach the practice room, said when I made my way there. She passed Chiaki and I a paper cup each and poured the contents in the bottle into the cups.

"Wait, this is liquor, isn't it?"

"You hate whiskey? I have sake too."

"That's not the point. We have lessons later!"

"More!" said Chiaki. She downed it all in a gulp before I could even stop her.

"Fwuaaa! It's just barley tea!"

"We'll be punished and disbanded if they found out," smiled Senpai.

"But I want some real liquor! It won't do if I do not drink a cup or two!"

Chiaki knocked her paper cup against the desk. She was not in a good mood since I met her at the train station.

"..... Something happened?"

"Of course!"

"What?"





"Uhhh— Senpai, did you hear the dumb things Nao said?"

Senpai hugged the teary-eyed Chiaki and patted her head gently.

"It's no good to drown yourself in alcohol, Comrade Aihara. We finally made it past the auditions and won ourselves a brief happiness from our victory last night, so we should be hugging each other in joy right now."

"Mmm, I won't be attending lessons today. I want to be together with Senpai all day."

"I am happy with that thought of yours, but the diligent me will attend my lessons obediently when it is two weeks to the exams."

"Then I want to attend lessons together with Senpai....."

"You want to hide yourself in my skirt?"

"I'll do my best!"

Don't! What the heck are you girls doing?

"Are you interested in joining us, Comrade Ebisawa?"

Senpai directed her gaze beyond my shoulders. I turned back in surprise.

A small slit appeared at the door, and a pair of navy blue eyes were peeking into the room. Senpai walked past me and Chiaki towards the door, grabbed Mafuyu by her wrist and pulled her in.

"Ah, don't....."





Mafuyu's tiny body was enveloped by Senpai's arms in a flash.

"Since the four of us are here, let us have another toast."

Mafuyu broke herself free from Senpai's arms and retreated to the side of the wall. She then removed the guitar off her body. The four of us exchanged gazes for a brief moment, but we broke our eye contact immediately.

In the end, there was no change in our relationships.

I suddenly noticed Chiaki glaring at me fiercely. What, did I do something wrong?

Chiaki turned her head away unhappily and pulled the table to the middle of the room.

"Toasting with barley tea is of no importance! Let's begin with our battle plans!"

"Right, it's about time we think about the songs that we will be playing during the actual performance."

Mafuyu nodded her head silently and sat on one of the stools.

"What should the theme of our next performance be? We should take the opportunity to coordinate our clothes as well."

"Since it's Christmas eve, how about all of us show up in a Santa mini-skirt?"

"No, that does not suit me."





"All the mini-skirt Santa in the world will be out of job if Mafu-Mafu is incompatible with that costume."

"Young man, how about you wear a normal mini-skirt as well? Or perhaps you should dress up as a reindeer? What a painful decision to make."

"Kyouko, that's not normal at all."

"I'll design the new set of clothes."

The girls began their discussion. I leaned against the wall and listened. Before I realized it, I was already staring at Mafuyu's right hand. There were so many things that require my attention, but I could not even move an inch.

However, Mafuyu did not come for the practice after school, and that was because she received a call right after the lessons were over. She dashed out of the classroom when her phone rang, but I remembered that ringtone. It was Ebichiri.

"Sorry, I am not too sure what is going on, but Papa wants me to head home right now."

Said Mafuyu to Chiaki and I apologetically. I was shocked. Tetsurou should have informed Ebichiri via Miss Matsumura about my baseless doubts. Is that the reason for this? I mean, Ebichiri's a worrywart when it comes to things concerning Mafuyu. Actually, it might be things related to the record company or the producers or something.





Doesn't that make me the same as Ebichiri as well? That kind of hurts.

"You're about to release your CD soon, right? Mafuyu will be getting busier and busier."

"M-Mmm..... The album is scheduled to release some time early next year."

"Your concert too?"

"I guess it will be somewhere later. But....."

Mafuyu gripped Chiaki tightly by her hands.

"I'll definitely continue practising with the band. I'll not cause any inconveniences to anyone of you."

"Mmm, I understand."

Chiaki patted Mafuyu hard on her head.

"But don't force yourself. Mafu-Mafu is always reckless in the things you do."

"Uh....."

Mafuyu's face went red. She walked out of the classroom after shooting a brief glance at me. "How's that!" Chiaki puffed her chest as if to emphasize something.

"..... What?"





"What a mature adult I am. I'll put on a smile regardless of the pain I am feeling; I'll cheer my enemy on even if my heart is bleeding."

"Sorry, I don't quite understand what—"

Stars appeared before my eyes all of the sudden — Chiaki had sunk her knee deep into my stomach. She gave me no time to catch my breath. The second and third strike followed right after.

"Wait! Don't..... stop! Chiaki, it hurts! What the hell are you doing!?"

"Nothing! Alright, let's head to the practice room! Nao you idiot!"

After she was close to knocking me out, Chiaki dragged me by my hands along the corridor.

"It's Christmas soon, so there're lots of things to be done!"

That was right. Therefore, I should settle everything before Christmas arrives.

The things related to Senpai. Or those related to Mafuyu. And the band, of course.

I began running on the corridor to Chiaki's lead. Through the windows, I could see the small silhouette and the maroon hair cutting across the parade square before the gates, about to make her way out of school.

Back then, there was nothing more than just a fleeting unease in my heart. Little did I know that the audition would turn out to be the swan song of feketerigó.





Chapter 10

Chilling Winds, The Cracked Room

Yuri called on Mafuyu's second day of absence from school. It was lunch break then. I jumped up from my seat when I saw the name of the caller that appeared on my phone, which attracted stares from my classmates. I dashed out of the room into the corridor.

"Naomi? Urm, right now—"

"Yuri? Is that you? Thank god, I finally got in touch with you. Urm, it's about Mafuyu. Do you know what happened to Mafuyu? She missed school, she did not pick up any of my calls, and when I went over to her house, I was turned away by Miss Matsumura—"

"Calm down, Naomi. There's something I have to tell you in regards to this. I went back to France due to some matters, so I did not receive your calls. Sorry for that. Also....."

Yuri's voice felt really heavy, and that caused the uneasiness to spread wider and wider within me.

"Do you know where Mafuyu is? Where is she?"

"Well, I'll fill you up when we meet. Hey, calm down. There's nothing to worry about."

"Why are you....."





"Are you free in the evening? Or at night? I can wait for you till really late."

"Of course I am. Where are you right now? Can I go over to your side?"

"Sorry, I am in Tokyo right now. Urm....."

Yuri told me about a practice room used by the orchestra, which is very well known in Japan. Tetsurou brought me to the place once before, so I should be able to find the place with the aid of my cellphone.

"I'll head there right now."

"Eh? But your classes....."

I disconnected the call.

I turned my head around. Chiaki was standing next to the door with her arm leaning against the it, her eyes filled with unease.

"Did you contact Mafuyu?"

I nodded my head hazily. Well, I did not really come into contact with the real Mafuyu. Damn it, why is everyone not clear and straightforward about this?

After leaving school early, Mafuyu never showed up ever since. She did send me two short messages though.

"I am on leave due to work."

"Sorry, I am currently in Tokyo. I'll explain when I return."





And that was all. She refused to take my calls. Chiaki and I did pay a visit to the Ebisawa household, but Matsumura put on her usual expressionless face and said, "Mistress is not around as she is currently in Tokyo to meet Mr Ebisawa. I do not know the reason for her doing so." She prevented us from entering the house.

Was she going to disappear without saying anything yet again? I felt a shiver in my spine. That won't happen — that was what I wanted to believe. That will never happen again. Was she together with Yuri right now? Did something happen?

"In any case, I'll head over to find out."

Chiaki's eyes widened.

"W-Where are you going? We still have classes in the afternoon!"

"I'll be leaving school early. Please inform our teachers and Senpai for me."

"— Nao!"

My wrists were restrained just as I was about to run out of the room. I was about to fling my arms in reflex, but I froze on the spot when I saw Chiaki with her teary eyes.

"..... Ah."

A murky voice escaped from Chiaki's trembling lips. The grip of her fingers loosened and slipped away weakly off my wrist.

"..... I'm sorry, it must be because..... it's Mafuyu. Nao's giving his all because it's about Mafuyu."





"Chiaki.....?"

"It's nothing," Chiaki gave me a kick in the ass. "Get going!"

But you're the one who grabbed me, no? However, upon seeing Chiaki trying her hardest to hold her tears back, I swallowed the words back into my throat and turned away in silence.

I rushed onto the train in my uniform and transferred onto the fast line that led to Zushi at the terminal. It took me about an hour to reach Shinagawa. I noticed the gaze from the passengers only when I was panting while grabbing onto the handles. What was going on? I took a brief scan around me and realized everyone was in warm winter attires. I rushed out of school without my coat on, and yet I did not notice the freezing temperature around me. I loosened my tie and slipped it into my chest pocket.

I took out my cellphone and opened up Mafuyu's messages which I had read for countless number of times. The messages did not look out of the ordinary. What exactly happened? Did it really have to do with her right hand?

As I flipped the phone shut, I could feel the pain as I gritted my teeth. I counted the sounds of the train rumbling on the railway in order to calm myself down.

I almost missed the Shinagawa station as I was deep in thought with my eyes closed, so I slipped my body past the closing doors and got myself off the train. Calm down. It would be incredibly silly of me if I were to get myself lost or encounter some sort of mishap right now.





I confirmed the position of the practice room via the navigation system of my cellphone and walked out of the ticketing gates. As the winds howled past my ears and my neck, I was finally hit with regret over the decision of not bring my coat along with me. I began running past the passer-bys with their faces hidden in the shadows.

The practice room was located in a residential area where there were not many high-rise buildings around. It was a pretty modern-looking cubic structure, very easy to spot. Should I just go to the information counter and mention Julien Flaubert's name? Or should I give Yuri another call? Would he be able to receive my call in the music studio— these doubts vanished immediately the moment I walked into the lobby. The golden-haired silhouette which was all huddled up in the sofa next to the elevator sprang up right away the instant he saw me.

"— Naomi!"

Yuri rushed towards me with his eyes all puffy. It was obvious he was crying not too long ago.

"Y-You really came right away. Sorry, urm, Maestro Ebisawa is not here yet."

"Ebichiri? You're meeting Ebichiri here? So Ebichiri's the one who wants to speak with me? Is Mafuyu together with him? Hey, what on earth....."

"Naomi, it hurts. Let go..... of me."

I snapped back to reality and saw my fingers digging hard into Yuri's frail shoulders.





"I-I'm sorry, but Mafuyu....."

"Let's get inside. It's not convenient here."

Yuri scanned the lobby with his teary eyes. The lady at the information counter was approaching us in shock, but Yuri waved his hand to show that he was alright. He then grabbed my hands and pulled me away. My brain had finally cooled down a little. What the hell was I doing in the lobby?

We went up two stories and walked into what looked like a reception room. In it was a glass table, two short sofas, a very plain bookshelf and some other simple furnitures. Photos of the past conductors were hanging neatly on the walls, staring down at us.

Yuri sighed and stood behind the sofa as rested himself by pressing his hands against it. He was in his male attire today — a simple wool sweater and long pants, which further emphasized how slim he was.

"Sorry for frightening you....." I started off with an apology. Thinking back, my attitude was kind of scary ever since I received Yuri's call. However, Yuri wiped the bottom of his eyes with the back of his hand and forced a smile on his face.

"I should be the one apologizing to Naomi instead."

"Why....."

Was it related to Mafuyu?





"Urm....." Yuri's sight landed on my fingertips. "It's not too appropriate for me to explain, and Maestro Ebisawa should be here soon."

"Has the condition of Mafuyu's right hand..... deteriorated?"

I looked straight into Yuri's eyes, which were crystal clear due to his tears. I knew my premonition was correct long before he nodded his head.

"Naomi's the only person who noticed. I-I am such a failure. I did not notice anything despite the multiple practices and rehearsals with her. It's all my fault."

Yuri's fingers, which he was using to lean against the back of the sofa, was trembling slightly.

"Why? It's not Yuri's fault—"

"They were checking her up for the past two days. I am not quite sure about the details, but her wrist..... The joint of her wrist was injured. Because she had been using the force of her wrist to cover up for her lack of strength in her fingers."

I was not the least bit surprised, and I did find that to be really intriguing.

Perhaps it was because I had already guessed it. I had prepared myself mentally before he blew the news to me. From the time when I ran from the school to the train station, and while I was on the train..... No wait, perhaps I noticed it when Mafuyu stopped coming to school..... Or did I predict all this ever since I noticed something was wrong with the sample tape?





Yuri's words were reverberating in the canals of my ears.

Using the force of her wrist to cover up for her lack of strength in her fingers.

That was not the piano. There was no way she could play the piano with such a technique. But—

She could if we're talking about the guitar. That was possible.

"..... Should this continue, there is a possibility that her right hand will never be able to move."

Yuri covered his face with his hands and continued.

"It's all because I..... I did not teach her the correct way of playing the guitar."

It felt like his voice was gradually sinking into a mire.

"Mafuyu might have been playing the guitar like she used to even after her fingers were fully healed..... And since she has begun with her piano practices once more....."

An irritating metallic sound came from my back — the opening of the door. However, I forced myself not to turn around.

"— So you are already here."

With that said, his footsteps began to close in towards me. I turned my head stiffly around, and there stood Ebichiri with a heavy coat on his body. He was looking at Yuri and me sternly. I wanted to greet him, but it felt like I was having difficulty controlling my head.





"You should have heard it from Yuri."

I planned to reply with a "Yes", but the voice which seeped out of my throat sounded more like a screech caused by the blackboard duster scraping past the strings of the violin.

"Why are both of you standing? Take a seat."

Yuri and I could not move despite his invitation. Ebichiri heaved a sigh.

"She went for a second check this morning. I am forbidding her from touching a guitar ever again."

My feet moved on reflex as I walked towards Ebichiri. However, when I saw him pursing his lips painfully as he shifted his gaze away, the words that were flowing up my throat had all changed into nothing more than a helpless sigh.

"I'll send her to America as quickly as possible. We can't have her losing the piano as well."

A certain uneasy feeling was gushing up within me. I dug my fingers deep into my arm in order to hold myself back. What about the Christmas? Everyone's going onto the stage, no? Chiaki and Kagurazaka-senpai had worked hard to have the best Christmas-eve ever, and even Mafuyu as well—

I swallowed my words. It was pointless telling Ebichiri stuff like that.

"I understand your feelings."

Ebichiri's voice were dry as usual, but I could feel his warmth.





"The band has made it through the auditions, didn't it? That girl told me all about it. She must have been elated for her to be telling me that without me asking."

I didn't want to hear that from him. It might have been selfish of me, but that sweet memory should have been kept to her father himself.

"However, I hope you understand."

"..... I..... do understand."

I spat the words out after much difficulty. It felt like I was a criminal who had his sentence announced to him.

All the practices which would put a strain on her hand will be stopped immediately. She will be heading to America for her treatment and rehabilitation. That will be the best for Mafuyu.

Even if it meant that she'll never be able to play the guitar ever again.

"The doctors said it shouldn't take long for her rehabilitation. Two months. She should be able to resume her studies if we time it to the winter holidays. However, for the guitar....."

Why must you say those things with an apologetic face? An indescribable anger was surging up within me. You should be speaking to me in an unreasonable manner. Who should I direct my hatred to if you're speaking with reason?





I clenched my fist hard, to the point where my nails were almost cutting the skin of my palms. I waited silently for my unreasonable anger to subside.

"I am really sorry for causing you to make this trip down. Mafuyu's being all willful, saying she does not want you to know about it, but how can that be possible? I wanted to tell you personally at the Hikawa's residence, but I have a discussion with Mafuyu's records company coming up after this."

"Where's..... Mafuyu? Where is she..... right now?"

"She's waiting in the car."

My heart ache as if there were nails flowing into it.

Mafuyu came. The desire to meet her and thoughts of what I should say to her after we met were all mixed up within my veins, causing my vision to darken. I almost knelt down.

"I am sorry, but I think it's for the best that you two do not meet for today."

I nodded my head in agreement to what Ebichiri had said. Just then, a flurry of footsteps could be heard from the corridor. The door opened all of the sudden.

"Papa, I heard Naomi's here—"

Mafuyu froze right as her eyes came into contact with mine. The only that was moving was Mafuyu's trembling lips. For some reason, her deep blue dress looked very much like a mourning dress. A portion of my brain was actually observing Mafuyu calmly in an unnatural way.





"W-Why?" Mafuyu's voice was like the final leaf left hanging from the tree branches in winter. "Why is Naomi here?"

"I asked him to come here."

Yuri, who had been sitting silently on the sofa all these while, finally spoke.

"Flaubert told him everything."

Ebichiri added with a painful voice. Mafuyu's face turned white in a flash.

"Why!? I told you not to tell Naomi, didn't I? Yuri's an idiot! Dummy!"

Mafuyu bent her body and screamed as she gripped onto the handle of the opened door. Even though my eyes were fixed onto her, for some reason, I knew Yuri's face was contorting in sorrow despite him standing behind me.







"Mafuyu, there's no point in blaming Yuri."

Mafuyu swung her hair about as she rejected her father's words.

"I'll be participating in the performance regardless of what Papa says! Everyone..... Everyone has been practising hard, so how can I put it all to waste!? Definitely not!"

In my mind was the sound of Earth fissuring up. Ebichiri's face turned red in anger as he gave a roar, probably something along the lines of "What are you talking about, you idiot?", but I could no longer process the sounds naturally. The only thing I could see was Mafuyu's lips trembling from the remnants of her pained voice, as well as her blue eyes which vision were blurred due to her tears.

"Naomi! You must not say it!" Her voice stabbed into my heart once more. "You must not tell Chiaki and Kyouko. Please. I'll play the guitar properly, I'll definitely last through the whole performance."

"What..... are you talking about?"

It felt as though I was tossed into a shattered world. I was not even certain if I was speaking right.

"It's your hand we are talking about, you know? You may never be able to play the guitar ever again, much less a live performance."

"I c-can still move it, it does not hurt at all. It's okay, it's just that my hand tires easily."

"Mafuyu!" I could finally hear Ebichiri's voice. "Did you not hear what the doctor said? It's even more dangerous because there are no obvious signs and symptoms! Stop being willful!"





"I must get on the stage! I've decided already!"

With that said, Mafuyu retreated and slammed the door hard. I could hear the sounds of her distancing footsteps coming from the other side of the wall.

"Do not follow us. You should head home for now."

Ebichiri yelled and stopped me just as I was about to run towards the door, dashing out of the room right after. The footsteps of them both were once again blocked off by the door.

My hands, which were reaching out for the door, slumped down weakly by my sides.

Was there nothing I could do? Even if I caught up to her, was there nothing I can say to Mafuyu?

A sob came from behind me. I turned around and saw a tearful Yuri pressing against the back of the sofa. He stood up after much difficulty.

"..... It's all..... my fault."

The painful words flowed along with his tears.

No, it was not Yuri's fault, Yuri was not in the wrong here. I could not tell him these falsified words of consolation — because the person who gave Mafuyu her guitar was none other than Yuri.

So the only thing I could do was to walk to his side and support his body before he collapsed onto the floor.





"Sorry, Naomi. I'm sorry....."

The young violinist buried his face into my chest and cried. I buried my hand between his golden hair and hugged him tightly. If I did not do that, I would probably have knelt on the floor, covered up my ears and sank myself into darkness as well.





Chapter 11

Backlighting, The Second Chime

Burying my body into the seat of the train, I traveled two loops around the Yamanote line which I had taken by mistake. I then finally transferred to the correct line and returned home.

As I walked out of the station, I grabbed my cellphone to look at the time. Five in the afternoon; no wonder it was so dark already. As for my missed calls, six of them were from Chiaki and one was from Senpai. The hazy and unreal stress, which I was feeling behind my ears all this while, suddenly pressed itself onto my shoulders.

Just as I was about to slip the phone into my pocket, it rang.

"Geez! You finally picked it up! Are you back? Did you see Mafuyu?"

"Eh? Ah, m-mmm."

Chiaki's ear-piercing voice made me feel at ease. I was no longer sure where my heart was.

"I saw her. Urm, I went to the orchestra's practice room. Yuri, Ebichiri and Mafuyu were all there."

"..... Did something happen? You—"





Chiaki's voice shriveled all of the sudden. I recalled the painful cries of Mafuyu. I can't tell Chiaki and Senpai.

Therefore, I switched my cellphone to my left hand, took a gulp and sat down on the stairs of the station, where there were not too many people.

"Urm, it's nothing huge. Well, you know, Mafuyu was chased about by reporters some time ago, right? It looks like the paparazzi are on her tail yet again."

I said it as slowly as I could to prevent my voice from splitting or rising in pitch.

"They chased her to her house, so she is currently hiding in a hotel in Tokyo. I think they wanted some help from Tetsurou, but they could not contact that idiot, so they asked Yuri to give me a call."

Incredible, I am lying through my teeth without even thinking. As I spoke to Chiaki, my voice and heartbeat began to steady themselves. I never thought I had a talent as useless as this. I'm the worst.

"I misunderstood things and went all the way to Shinagawa. What an idiot I was."

"Is that..... so? Thank goodness....."

When I heard Chiaki's warm and gentle voice, my chest hurt as though it were pierced by a drill. She believed me, she actually believed me. I guess so, since I was the only person who had felt something was wrong with her right hand when I heard the violin concerto — but I guess that was to be expected.





"Why didn't she give me a call? That's so mean! Senpai is worried too!"

"Y-Yeah." I tried to conjure up an excuse as if I was wringing the towel dry. "Because it seemed like the reporters were checking up on the band as well. Mafuyu said she doesn't want to trouble you. And if you knew where she was, you might have forced your way to her place to meet up with her."

"Nao's the only idiot who will do stuff like that!"

You're right. I'm the only idiot who will do that.

"And so? Will she be coming back tomorrow?"

"Eh? Ah, urm, I'm not too sure. It probably won't be long."

What now? How long is Mafuyu planning to keep this a secret? It's quite impossible to do so forever. Why am I lying as she had asked me to?

"Let's work on our outfits then, alright? I've got a really interesting idea, so I'll bring along the sample tomorrow."

"Mmm, I got it. Urm, can you explain everything to Kagurazaka-senpai for me?"

"Nao, you should tell her yourself—"

"Nah, she'll scold me silly if I'm the one telling her."

Chiaki gave a giggle.





"Okay, I got it. I'll pass the message for you. Will you be coming back to school later?"

"Ah....." Right, I left my coat and my bag at school. "Mmm, I'll be there later."

I hung up the call and slid the phone into my pocket. As of now, it felt like my hands were coming into contact with some sort of stinking oil or something.

The reason I asked Chiaki to pass the message was because Senpai would see through my lies in an instant. Then again, I had to make the trip back to school. It felt really horrible. I couldn't even stand up. Then again, if I were to head straight home, Chiaki would definitely deliver my stuff to me, and that would make things awkward.

I sat myself in a corner of the stairs and buried my head between my legs for a good ten minutes till the cold seeped through my body. It was difficult to stand up even with the aid of the handlebar.

The next day, Mafuyu did not show up for the morning practice as well.

"Mafuyu's not coming today as well? But I made a new T-shirt already."

Said Chiaki unenthusiastically as she adjusted the bass drum's pedal after the three of us were done with tuning.

"Hmm, I'm not too sure either."





I made a few calls yesterday night, but she never picked up any of them.

After tuning her instrument carefully, Kagurazaka-senpai spoke.

"Young man, you have something to say to me, right? If you want, we can head to a place where we will be by ourselves."

A shiver ran down my spine. Senpai said that in a half-jokingly manner, but there was no hint of mischief in her eyes.

Does Senpai know something? It's her we're talking about. It's possible that she found the whereabouts of Mafuyu and what happened to her right hand during the two days I was moping.

No, there's no way she would remain silent if she knew.

Because—

feketerigó can never fly again.

"Senpai's avoiding my words regardless of what I have to say, right? I have given up already."

I continued my lie and even put on a smile. Why is this so? I'm not too sure myself. There was no way I could look into Senpai's eyes; a pair of eyes which could see through everything. Therefore, I heaved a sigh of relief when she directed her attention towards Chiaki.

"It's unlikely we'll agree with your suggestion, but let's just see the clothes you've come up with this time, Comrade Aihara."





"That's just mean, Senpai! I'm planning to give Mafuyu a huge surprise, so I shall keep things a secret for a little while longer."

I listened to their reassuring conversation from afar and pretended to spend the bulk of my time tuning my bass. The bells rang soon enough.

Mafuyu was not in class as well. She did not show up even after we were done with our homeroom or after our lessons had started. It's already the fourth day, and I was bombarded with questions like "Our Princess is not in school today as well, does Nao know why?" from my classmates, including Terada.

What's going on? Is she still undergoing checks? Or did Ebichiri lock her up in their house? That is highly possible, judging from what she had said yesterday before we parted. She said she will definitely participate in the live Christmas concert. What the heck was she thinking? There's the possibility of her not being able to move her right hand.

She wouldn't fly to America without informing us, would she? No, Ebichiri should be busy with preparations for his performance of Beethoven's ninth.

It should be okay for her to attend school, right? I wanted to see Mafuyu so badly.

I wanted to see her.

The rest of my morning lessons were spent on gripping hard onto my desk and enduring the uneasy thoughts I had within me.





I had no appetite during lunch break, so I passed my lunch box to Chiaki. I then headed towards the office to pick up the keys to our practice room.

"Oh, Nao. Good timing."

I was caught by someone at the entrance to the office. It was Miss Maki, the music teacher and advisor of the Folk Music club. She looked visibly tired. It was quite a waste of her young and beautiful face, which was perfectly suited to tricking the male students in school.

"Mafuyu's here at the music preparatory room."

She whispered. I jumped in surprise and looked at Miss Maki's face.

"I heard the details from Maestro Ebisawa. You should head over for now. I have to make a trip to the administration office."

I nodded my head stiffly.

"You said nothing to Kagurazaka or Aihara about Mafuyu's right hand, right?" asked Miss Maki in a hushed tone.

"..... Yeah, Mafuyu said not to tell them."

"Even so, it's not possible to keep it a secret forever."

Miss Maki's right, but the only thing I could do is to keep my lips tight.

"Think about what you can do."





As she gave me a slap on the back, I dashed in the direction of the stairs.

Located at the fourth story of the school building to the right of the music room's metal door is a sliding door — that's the music preparatory room. A place no student will enter under normal circumstances. Miss Maki's territory, to be exact.

As I opened the door, my eyes were greeted by rays of the sun amidst the winter noon due to the opened curtains. The maroon-coloured hair was waiting on the other side of the piano, which had taken up half the space of the cramped room.

Mafuyu stood up before the backlighting. She opened her eyes wide and shifted her chair backwards. Her hair was fluttering, the scores in her hand dropped onto the floor.

I was expecting her to hit me with some harsh words, but all Mafuyu did was to lower her eyes and sit back onto the chair.

I stepped into the room, closed the door and leaned against the wall on the left in order to avoid the rays from the window.

Both of us remained silent for quite a while. I could almost hear the sun inching across the sky.

"..... Sorry."

Mafuyu finally spoke.

"For what happened yesterday."

I shook my head. She apologized first, and that caused me to be filled with guilt.





"Yuri..... he's not..... angry, right?"

"He wasn't, but he cried."

Back then, Yuri refused my offer to send him back home. He dashed out of the reception room. I then collapsed onto the sofa helplessly, unable to move for a while.

"Yuri..... he's not in the wrong."

Mafuyu shifted her gaze to her opened right hand and murmured.

"This is not Yuri's fault. I'll come up with something."

"You'll come up with something?"

"I just have to hold past the live Christmas performance."

"You're still saying stupid things like that?" I moved towards the piano subconsciously. "Now's not the time to be thinking about the concert, is it? You might not even be able to play the piano ever again!"

"Why does the piano matter....."

Mafuyu said that subconsciously and reflexively gripped onto her arm with her right hand. She swallowed her words.

"I-I do know it's really silly of me to be thinking this way, but....."

"If that's the case, then....."





"But I want to take part in the concert! I don't want to be unable to play the guitar!"

"That's why I am telling you not to push yourself. What if you really break that hand of yours?"

"It doesn't matter even if I break it!"

My heart was pierced by Mafuyu's words.

With her right hand pressing on the area above her heart and her eyes filled with tears, Mafuyu continued.

"Because, I am doing it all for Naomi....."

"For me.....?"

"That applies to the piano, and it's the same for the guitar. I am playing them for Naomi's sake. My hand's as good as broken if I cannot perform on the same stage as you. I cannot accept the fact that Chiaki and Kyouko can perform together with you, but not me."

I stumbled against the icy cold wall.

"Why..... are you willing to go through such lengths?"

What the hell was I asking? Am I an idiot? It felt as though there was a calm persona in my mind that was giving me a hard kick to the skull. Mafuyu's face looked as if it was melting.

"Why? You're asking me why? Do you not have the slightest idea at all?"





That was enough to shatter me, who was already filled with cracks all over.

"Wait, Mafuyu. I'm sorry—"

"Say no more!"

Mafuyu covered her ears and screamed.

"I do not need your concern! I do not want to hear that from you!"

"Then what should I do?"

"I don't know! I don't know!"

Mafuyu hugged her head and slumped onto the piano's chair once more. Her shoulders were trembling violently.

The world felt light all of the sudden. The walls, bookshelves, piano and chair were all flying around me. What's happening? I looked around in bewilderment before realizing that I had collapsed onto the floor. I leaned against the wall and straightened my legs.

It felt like every ounce of my strength was sapped away by the icy floor.

Why have things turned out this way?

Is it because of my inability to express myself properly? Does Mafuyu know about Kagurazaka-senpai's confession as well as my inability to reject her decisively, and how I have been pushing the conclusion further back all the time?





Even if she did not know about it, Mafuyu still celebrated her birthday with me despite the uneasiness within her from all my excuses for not moving forward.

She was trying her hardest to stand on the same stage with me on Christmas.

I'm the worst.

There's nothing I can say now which will be of help to Mafuyu's right hand. Our Christmas is totally wrecked already. There's no salvaging it.

Still, I straightened my knees and stood myself up. I supported myself against the edge of the piano's cover.

"Mafuyu."

Her frail shoulder flinched.

"Mafuyu's....."

The words following that were stuck on the edge of my mouth, not knowing where they should be going. They then arrived at a freezing place.

"Mafuyu's body is way more important. The Christmas concert will be there every year, but Mafuyu's right hand is irreplaceable. You have to get it treated."

What the hell was that? I wasn't planning to nag at her. There should be something else that I wanted to say. Mafuyu's swayed her maroon hair.





"I know that. Please do not say the same things as Papa did."

I could not even touch her shoulders despite the close distance within us. I froze on the spot.

"I know that. Of course I do. But Naomi may not be around for the next Christmas."

"How can that be....."

I swallowed my words.

I am the cause of the unreasonable unease within her, isn't that so?

I was at a loss for words as Mafuyu hugged her shoulders and huddled herself up.

There was a long period of silence between us for god knows how long. When Mafuyu stood up, the sun was still lurking somewhere around the roof of the sports complex. It did not move an inch.

"Where..... are you going?"

I was forced to pop the question when I saw Mafuyu squeezing past the narrow gap between the piano and the wall and making her way towards the door.

"To the practice room."

A cold answer.





"But..... you can't play the guitar, right?"

With her hand pressed against the door, Mafuyu nodded with her back still facing me.

"Papa has confiscated my Stratocaster."

"Then what are you planning to do? How long are you planning to keep it hidden from Senpai and Chiaki—"

"I know that!"

Mafuyu walked out of the room. I chased after her footsteps in a hurry.

Kagurazaka-senpai was there at the Folk Music room already. When we walked inside, she tossed the scores onto the synthesizer, stood up and gave Mafuyu a sudden, tight hug.

"Mmmmmmm.....—"

Mafuyu swung her arms about painfully as her face was forcefully buried into Senpai's coat.

"Whoaa..... S-Senpai!"

I tried to break them up, but Senpai hugged Mafuyu and dodged my attempt.

"You can't have Comrade Ebisawa all to yourself, young man."

"What do you mean by that!?"

"It..... hurts, please let me go, Kyouko."





"I will not be able to make up for the loneliness I've suffered for the past three days if I don't do this."

Mafuyu, who was planning to shove Kyouko away, dropped her arms weakly by her side.

"There's no need for words right now. I just need a confirmation."

Senpai whispered into Mafuyu's ears. Ahh, she knew something was going on — that's what I noticed. I retreated into a corner, sat down on the floor and watched on like an idiot as the two girls continued to hug each other.

"..... I'm sorry."

Mafuyu murmured with the tip of her nose buried into Senpai's bosom. Senpai stroked her hair quietly before finally letting her go and allowed Mafuyu to take a seat.

"You did not bring your guitar along, did you?"

Senpai's question caused Mafuyu's shoulders to flinch. It was a silent confirmation.

"I see."

It seemed like Senpai was at a loss for words as well. Surprising, since she is an expert with words.

There was a creaking sound, followed by the flowing of cold air into the room. The three of us looked towards the direction of the door at the same time.





"Mafuyu! You should have gone to the classroom if you were in school! I was so worried about you!"

Chiaki pounced towards Mafuyu and hooked her arms around Mafuyu's neck.

"M-Mmm....."

A disturbed expression appeared on Mafuyu's face. She pressed her cheek against Chiaki's arm. Chiaki then noticed the heavy atmosphere within the room. She took a glance at Senpai before shifting her gaze towards me as if she had just noticed my presence in the room.

"..... Did something happen?"

Finally, Chiaki looked in the direction of Mafuyu. Mafuyu shook her head.

"Nothing. Everyone's waiting for Comrade Aihara to heat things up!"

Lied Senpai with a stiff smile on her face. There was no way Chiaki could not tell that something was amiss, but she tilted her head and said, "Well then" — she then pulled out a paper bag from the bottom of the table. She's probably planning to do just what Senpai had said.

"And this, is feketerigó's new T-shirt! Well, there's only one sample since it takes quite a bit of effort to make."

Chiaki took out a bright yellowish-green long sleeved T-shirt from the paper bag and spread it out on display. The rings at the neck and sleeves were red.





"Mmm, rejected. I guess we can sell it as fan merchandise," Senpai's reply was instantaneous.

"That's mean! It took me a great deal of effort to make this! Here, this is the badge for <Lonely Hearts Club Band>. I've included the armband too."

Mafuyu and I were shocked by that incredibly flashy shirt.

It's true. There's the badge on the chest, and printed on the sleeve was a V-shaped red and yellow armband.

"This is scanned from the cover of <Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band> which Nao gave to me. Same size as that on the record. Beautiful, isn't it?"

"..... Naomi..... gave it to you?" Mafuyu's voice was trembling.
"..... The Beatles?"

Chiaki's expressions darkened as she nodded her head. I could hear something cracking up behind Mafuyu. When she turned around, her gaze was drained of any warmth in them.

"..... Why? You gave it to Chiaki too?"

My mind went blank. When I nodded my head, I could feel my dry throat spasm in pain. I did not stop Mafuyu as she kicked her chair and prepared to leave.

"W-Wait, Mafuyu? W-What's wrong?"

Chiaki went over and grabbed Mafuyu by her shoulder. Mafuyu turned around and swatted her hand away. She leaned her back





against the wall, her face so ghastly white it looked almost transparent.

"D-Do you hate this shirt that much? U-Urm, you don't have to wear it on stage if you don't want to."

Mafuyu shut her eyes tight and shook her maroon hair with all her might.

"I won't be going on stage ever again anyway."

"..... Huh?"

"I can no longer play the guitar. For the past two days, I have been undergoing body checks in the hospital. The doctor said my wrist will not be able to withstand the stress should I continue to play the guitar the way I did. And so!"

Stop. I wanted to yell. But the air in my throat leaked away, and I could not make any sound. I was unable to stand up as well. There..... There should be a better way to resolve the situation, but it was me who pushed Mafuyu into a corner. It was me.

"Mafuyu!"

Mafuyu dashed out of the room just as Chiaki was about to get close to her. She probably kicked the door open, because the building was trembling slightly as the cold air entered the practice room once more and blew away the last remaining warmth that was enveloping my body.

I stood up. I have to chase after Mafuyu. However, Chiaki grabbed me by my collar.





"W-What? What was that just now? Hey, what did Mafuyu mean when she said 'You gave it to Chiaki too'?"

The dizziness from standing up all of the sudden and my guilt were mixing into a blackish-red patch in my mind. I wanted to puke. But I endured the nauseousness by pinching against my side and replied.

"..... It's Mafuyu's..... birthday present..... which I gave her. The vinyl record of <Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band>."

The same present as the one I gave Chiaki. I am an idiot. A hopeless one. *Pa!* My neck was twisted around by a strong force as stinging pain spread through my cheeks. Chiaki slapped me.

"You idiot! D-Don't chase after us! I'll go instead!"

Chiaki dashed out of the room, and the door of the practice room closed once more. The wind pressure caused me to fall backwards, but I was supported by something soft behind me. Thanks to that, I did not drop onto the floor.

Looking up above me, I could see the emotionless face of Kagurazaka-senpai.

She was supporting me with her arms beneath my armpits.

"..... S-Sorry."

I wanted to stand up and move away from Senpai, but she refused to let me go. She clasped her hands before my chest.

Body heat was leaving me.





As if all the blood within me was flowing out of my ears.

Chiaki and Mafuyu never returned, even after the preparatory bell which signalled the end of our lunch break rung. I was sitting silently on a chair as I continued to hug in my chest the shirt Chiaki made. As for Kagurazaka-senpai, she was facing the desk with the guitar resting on her thighs, scribbling notes continuously onto the staves. From the occasional phrases which she strummed, I could tell she was rearranging the piece to make it so that a single guitar can play it.

At the same time the bell chimed, Senpai closed the notebook shut and put her guitar back into its case.

"— Young man."

The silence was finally broken.

"..... Yes?"

"You know, I did something really despicable. Do you know why I chose to confess to you at a time like that?"

Why?

Was there a reason for it?

"It was a curse."

I was stunned. My eyes were staring blankly at Senpai.





"Confessing to you meant I would destroy the balance between our inter-human relationship. And I refused to know your answer too. Young man, that was to prevent you from doing to Mafuyu what I did to you. A curse."

"Wha—"

"Because I wanted to have you so badly. Even if there was a ninety-nine percent chance of me failing; even if I had to run away; even if I was forced to inch forward by crawling..... I still wished to stake everything on that last possibility. I am not ashamed of the despicable stuff which I have done. However....."

Senpai snapped up the spring buckle of the guitar case and leaned it against the wall.

"As someone who failed to see an ending like this, I find myself to be the worst. I'm disgusted with myself."

What is she talking about?

Senpai's not the one who's wrong. Everything is my fault.

Just as I was about to sink deep into a dark mire, Senpai pulled me up forcibly without much consideration for my feelings.

"Young man, I'll never smile before you ever again."

"..... Eh.....?"

"I've lost my interest in a battle with no enemies. It's not even worth me using all of my despicable tricks. My love for you shall be frozen as of now on."





As she stepped out of the room, she did not even turn her head around to look at me.

"The next time I show you my smile will be the day when Comrade Ebisawa returns."

The door was shut. I slid down the wall and curled myself up.

Alone by myself in a room filled with dust, I could hear the second bell chiming.





Chapter 12

Treasure, Butterfly, Heat of Machine

That night, I heard a tapping sound on the other side of the drawn curtain while sitting by myself on my bed in the dark, hugging my knees.

Someone was knocking on the window.

"..... Chiaki?"

I curled myself up. For a brief moment, I had thought it was Mafuyu. However, I could tell it was Chiaki from how the knocks sounded. Or perhaps I came to that conclusion because I did not want to be disappointed by my expectations.

The strong, rapid knocks forced me to respond.

"Come in, the window's unlatched."

I was too lazy to get off my bed. First came the sound of the window opening, then the sound of the curtains being drawn.

Chiaki was standing right there with the aluminium window frame and the night sky as her backdrop. She had climbed through the second floor window via the tree in the garden. Her slightly orange hair was untied and fluttering in the cold winds of the winter night, slapping against her checks. She was still in her uniform though.





She rested her right hand against the frame, but she did not step in. With my eyes being accustomed to the darkness, I could see her staring fiercely at me with something in her left hand.

I gulped saliva down my parched throat and got off my bed. I then realized I was still wearing my uniform as well.

"..... What..... happened to Mafuyu? Did you find her?"

They did not return for the afternoon lessons.

Basking in the night light, Chiaki muttered with a voice that could be blown apart by the winds,

"All Nao thinks of is Mafuyu."

I took a deep breath.

"..... Urm, sorry, it's nothing..... I didn't catch up to Mafuyu. I lost her. I did go over to her home to check, but they said she wasn't around and chased me away. I skipped school since it was way too troublesome."

"Chiaki, urm....."

"So what about the live performance?"

What are you still standing there for? It's really dangerous, you know? — I thought to myself.

"..... Well, Senpai probably....."

"I'm not asking about Senpai!" Chiaki gave a sudden roar. "I'm asking what Nao has in mind!"





W-Who, me?

There was nothing left in me to think about the band or the performance anymore. Even now, it's taking a great deal of effort just to stand up using the leg of the bed.

"I—"

My voice brushed past Chiaki's ears and disappeared into the darkness on the other side of the window.

There was nothing to block it.

"..... Whatever, I get it."

Chiaki smiled for the first time. She then slightly changed the angle of her face. The street-lights outside the window shone on Chiaki's cheeks, and I noticed there were visible traces of moisture on her face. Upon noticing there was something off with the expression on my face, Chiaki hurriedly brushed her cheeks with the back of her hands.

"Here, I'm returning this to you."

Chiaki stretched her left hand through the window. What she was holding was a flat and large squarish—

It was a red record jacket. <Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band>.

There was no way I could stretch my hands out to take it. All I had to do was to move about two meters forward and reach out for it. But I could not even leave the side of my bed.





"Take it quickly! Stupid Nao!"

She tossed it over. The jacket hit my knee and dropped onto the floor like a dead moth.

I picked it up slowly. It was then that I realized how strangely light it was.

"..... Just the jacket? What about the disk?"

Actually, it doesn't really matter. It's okay for her not to return it to me.....

"Just the jacket. Because I'll think of Mafuyu's tearful expression whenever I see it, and that pisses me off. I kept the record though."

"W-Why.....?"

"What do you mean by 'why!'?" screamed Chiaki as she gripped onto the window frame. "How can I possibly return the content? That's my treasure, you know!? You should at least understand that much, you idiot!"

Chiaki slammed the window shut with great force, as if trying to break it apart.

"I've had enough for today! You should just die, Nao!"

Came her voice through the glass. Chiaki's body then disappeared from my sight in a flash. There was the sound of footsteps on my roof, followed by the rustling of the branches and the twigs brushing against the walls of the building.





All these sounds were swallowed up by the night in an instant.

Hugging the empty record jacket, I sat onto my bed once more.
Her treasure.

My phone rang in the middle of the night. The ring tone, <Blackbird>, caused me to fall off my bed onto the floor.

I checked and rechecked the vibrating screen multiple times. It was Mafuyu. It really was Mafuyu.

"Mafuyu? Is this Mafuyu?"

I popped that stupid question the moment I picked up the call. For a while, nothing came out from the receiver. My chest was stirring with unease.

"..... Sorry for the call despite the late hour."

It was Mafuyu's voice. But she spoke as if she was speaking to a stranger — that made me depressed.

"U-U-Urm, with regards to the record incident today, well....."

What now? How should I go on with my apology? Should I even be apologizing? What for? My thoughts came to a standstill and were rumbling about within my eyeballs. I felt like puking.

"It does not matter anymore."

"— It does! Well, I—"





"It does not. I've had a proper talk with Papa today. I have decided to go to America once more. There are really professional doctors there."

The bubbling breaths were stirring up my chest.

"Since I will be staying there for a year, I will not be going to school any more."

I shut my eyes tight in an attempt to locate any hint of emotion in Mafuyu's voice. I found nothing. A year? She will not be coming to school for a whole year? Bit by bit, just like a transparent liquid spreading outwards, the meaning to her words was finally conveyed into my consciousness.

"..... But..... your father said it will take only two months or so....."

"I have already made up my mind. I asked Papa to change the plan."

Mafuyu's voice, soft but unshaken, severed my trembling voice.

"Papa is already making preparations. He will be bringing me there as quickly as possible, even if it is very demanding of me. We will be heading off soonest by early next year. Perhaps we can even make it by the end of this year."

When had we first met? I tried recalling with my blanked mind. It was early April during spring. It has not even been a year. But it felt like we had been together for a long, long time.

"Therefore—"





Therefore? Therefore, what?

However, Mafuyu and I said nothing after that.

I was not even sure when the call was disconnected.

I threw the phone onto my bed, covered my trembling body with a blanket and curled myself in bed once more. I had no idea what time it was then, but I was not the least bit sleepy. I tried to refrain from thinking any deeper, but my consciousness was having ideas of its own. Plenty of failures, lots of meaningless propositions — if only I had said that; what if I did not mention this..... Stuff like that. All these things were taking heat away from my body bit by bit.

I finally realized the reason for my sleeplessness was not because I did not shut my eyes. There was something going on in my mind. Furthermore, my eyeballs would roll about whenever I shut them, resulting in pain.

I kicked away the blanket and sat up. The chilling temperature turned into thousands of needles and pricked my body.

The light from the living room below was filtering through the slit of the door. I could hear the faint sound of music.

"..... Oh, so you're still up? It's already two. Get to bed after you're done peeing."

Said Tetsurou without turning his head as he continued to tap onto the laptop while lying on the sofa. As for me, my dull mind was trying to figure out the familiar melody that was swirling around my ears.





The cassette player, located in the middle of the sound system, was whirling. It was a violin concerto. The one Mafuyu gave to me.

"Ahh, sorry. I played it without asking. It seemed like things are getting serious."

Tetsurou's nonchalant speech was a sort of consolation to my battered heart.

I knelt before the boom box. Thank god it was <Spring>. I would have frozen on the spot if it were <Kreutzer> playing. Yuri's warm timbre was fluttering above Mafuyu's slow footsteps like a swarm of butterflies.

I pressed the stop button to retrieve the tape from the player.

The plastic object was lying flat on my palm.

With both my hands grabbing onto the cassette tape, I began injecting force into my thumb. It was almost a subconscious effort. It's all its fault. If only I had not listened to it. If only I did not notice it.

If I did not notice it..... will things still turn out like this? It may have been way worse than how things are right now.

But that is of no importance to me. I no longer wish to hear Mafuyu's piano.

It will be great if everything's broken.

The transparent plastic surface was turning murky white. *Kra, kra*. It was an unpleasant sensation.





However, my fingers were drained of their strength in an instant.

Pa. The sound came from the tape. A tear had fallen onto the surface. It was a tear which had finally forced its way out of my eyes. There was still a faint trace of heat left in the tape. Even if it was heat caused by the spinning of the machine, the fact that it was heat was undeniable.

The present Mafuyu gave to me.

There was no way I could desert it, much less destroy it. Because it is my treasure. No matter what happens and no matter where Mafuyu goes, the fact that I love Mafuyu will never change. It's the same as how I can't abandon these feelings of mine.

"Ah..... A-Ah....."

A choking voice was flowing from my throat.

I hugged the tape tightly before my chest, as if I were trying to force it through my ribs.

Treasure. The word Chiaki mentioned earlier. The record which I gave her. The streak of tears which I saw due to the street-lights.

How can it be? But.....

I..... see. Why.....

I curled myself up before the boom box which was giving off some background noise. The skin on my neck felt like it was about to tear apart. I actually realized something at the worst possible moment. No way, it has to be my imagination. I must have gotten





it wrong somewhere. I was trying my hardest to convince myself deep in my mind. However, at a depth way deeper than that was the confirmation which came from my soul.

With the tape still nested in my hand, I dashed out of the living room and climbed up the stairs to my room to pick up my cellphone. Just as I was searching for Chiaki's number, my fingers stopped. What's the point in calling her now? Is there anything I could say to her?

What I did to Chiaki was just as bad as what I did to Mafuyu..... No, it was way worse.

I dropped myself onto bed. My body was an ironic existence as well — it actually felt like passing out at a time like this. And so, with the cassette tape and the cellphone in my hands, I was forcefully dragged off to sleep.





Chapter 13

Morning, News Report, Dog Whistle

"Nao, hey Nao! I'm going out soon, so fix me my breakfast!"

The rattling of my shoulders forced me to slowly open my eyes. It's as if my body was stuck to the bed sheets — I could feel my skin tearing apart when I twisted my neck.

I fixed my sight onto the ceiling for a while to get my eyes accustomed to the bright surroundings before shooting a glance at Tetsurou's face.

"..... This is the worst morning of my life....."

So what awaits me after the worst night of my life is Tetsurou waking me up in the morning?

"Hurry up and fix me my breakfast! I have something to discuss with Company M today, but they're unwilling to fork out some lunch money."

Enough, quit shaking me, my head hurts. I swatted Tetsurou's hands away and sat myself up with a frown. It's a little too bright around here. What time is it already?

"Oh right, I called school and applied leave on your behalf since you still weren't up at eight. Ain't I a nice Daddy?"





"It's already ten, damn it! If you were making the call anyway, why didn't you just wake me up at eight instead!?"

A brief glance at the clock was enough to wake me up fully. I leapt off my bed and questioned Tetsurou.

"So you're pushing the blame onto others and ignoring the fact that you were lazing in bed. Kids nowadays."

"U-Ugh....."

Nothing pisses me off more than being rebutted by sound arguments that come from Tetsurou. Whatever, I'm too ashamed to see Chiaki or Kagurazaka-senpai anyway, so I might as well take a rest. I pulled up the blanket and covered my head with it.

"My breakfast!" said Tetsurou with an embarrassing voice.

"There's [Weider in Jelly](#) in the fridge."

"Can you heat that up and use it as gravy on rice?"

Do as you please.

I did not offer a retort since I thought he was just kidding, but when he actually walked out of my room without saying anything, I caught up to him and made my way to the kitchen.

I waited for Tetsurou to finish a simple meal of Chinese-don before sending him off to work.

"Have you ever listened to Mafuyu's tape in its entirety? From the beginning to the end?"





Asked Tetsurou with his head turned around as he put on his shoes at the door.

"..... Eh?"

Of course I did. All the way till the tarantella of <Kreutzer Sonata>. That was the point where I noticed the invisible injury to Mafuyu's right hand. Why is he bringing that up all of the sudden?

"In any case, it's best you listened to it all the way till the end."

And with that, Tetsurou was off. The sounds of the exhaust were getting further and further away.

What does he mean by that? I don't understand him. And it's not like I want to listen to that tape again — it's just way too painful.

I shook my head to stop my thoughts. My vision was still blurry, so I decided to take a shower. The shirt on my body was all wrinkled since I had worn my uniform to sleep.

I returned back to the living room as I dried my hair with a towel. Despite the fantastic weather outside, I felt cold even after putting on a wool cardigan over my thick sweatshirt. When did I start not giving a damn about skipping classes? When did it all begin?

Was it when my life began to revolve around the band?

I fished out the tape which had dropped beneath my bed and brought it back to the living room on the first floor as if I was holding an egg.

After pressing the play button, I turned the volume down and curled myself on the sofa.





What came flowing to me was the beautiful melody of the violin sonata <Spring>. Beethoven's an inconceivable composer. It was a scenic view, but he did not express it simply with just a beautiful phrase. There are specific places where it will stab you deep into your heart, inflicting more and more sorrow as the piece progresses.

I shouldn't be listening to this. I did not want to imagine Mafuyu hammering on the keys with her delicate, blood-stained fingers. However, I remained curled up motionlessly on the sofa, listening to <Kreutzer Sonata> even after it had started. It felt like Yuri's violin was severing my head off my neck, while Mafuyu's piano was inflicting wounds to each and every bone in my body — however, the pain was actually pretty comfortable to me.

Mafuyu's about to leave my side.

But even so, there's still the possibility of hearing her piano in the future. Having abandoned the guitar, Mafuyu will definitely return back to that world after she's done with her rehabilitation in America.

Is this okay?

I am okay with this?

The strength in my arms that were circling my knees was increased. I huddled my body to dodge the intense dance and the violent clashes between Mafuyu and Yuri; to escaped the sparks, heat and pain released by the tarantella of the final movement.





<Kreutzer> was finally over. The remaining reverberations were sucked dry by the silence of the winter noon. All that was left was the sound of the tape rotating.

Feketerigó was already broken.

If that is what Mafuyu wants, then nothing I think or do matters anymore.

Should Mafuyu seek help, I will be there to bring her back somehow. But this time's different. Mafuyu is heading across the oceans by her own accord. With that, the ones left behind are us three—

Pa. I lifted my head. It came from the sound system. The cassette player had spun to the end of the A-side, so it was changing sides automatically.

There was a suffocating white noise for a brief moment.

And then, flowing from the bottom were the pure and clean sounds of the Stratocaster. Each and every note was as clear as the silver strands of rain before they merged into a seamless harmony which flowed into my ears. It was a brilliant arpeggio.

It wasn't any song in particular. Just a phrase which Mafuyu strums as warm-up every time she plays the guitar. The upward-spiralling air bubbles of the semitone; the flock of birds weaving between the clouds and the ground. Sounds, sounds and more sounds, arranged together in perfect geometry and distance away from each other, all injected into my veins.

So there were such recordings on the B-side, huh. I totally didn't realize that. Is this what Tetsurou was referring to?





I imagined the dirty walls, amplifiers, synthesizers and chairs arranged all around the floors of our practice room. There's Mafuyu, with her head lowered as she strums her guitar. Chiaki, all warmed-up, smashes onto the hi-hat as she barges into the rhythm. Kagurazaka-senpai will then flick on the switch of the microphone with a smile, causing a minute noise to streak through the air. That is how we would usually start.

A scene which will no longer return.

I shut my eyes to savour the sweet hallucination.

The tape came to a sudden halt. I was thrown back to an empty living room once more. What was left in the rocking practice room was my heart.

If I could just hug onto my knees, plug up my ears and just live through numerous nights and mornings, then things would be settled with me forgetting everything cleanly. Left alone, a broken object will just break down even further. That's normal, and it's also easier for me. I understood that much.

Therefore, I stood up from the sofa.

When I returned back to my room, I began packing my tool box. I then opened up the storage cabinet located downstairs — there was a plastic drawer filled with all sorts of junk that I had collected till now. I do maintain them minimally, but it still took me quite a bit of time to locate the stuff that I need.





I made my way towards Chiaki's home when night arrived. It was only a five-minute trip between our houses.

I thought about giving her a call prior to my visit, but I had no idea what I should say to her. Also, it will be troublesome if she forbids me from going. Therefore, I was left with no other option but to pay her a sudden visit at night.

"Oh my, it's Nao. Chiaki? She's in. Come on in. Have you had your dinner already? Chiaki~ Nao's here—"

It had been a while since I visited the Aihara household, but Chiaki's mom was the same as usual. She yelled in the direction of Chiaki's room, which was located on the second floor, and pulled me through the door without saying anything else.

"U-Urm, well....."

A flurry of footsteps came scuttering down the stairs just as I was about to speak.

Chiaki was wearing a pair of hot-pants and a t-shirt — it was so skimpy it hardly felt like it's a winter night. Her half-opened jaws were staggering for a good five seconds or so, and her face was all red.

"W-W-What are you doing here!? You idiot! How dare you come here!?"

"S-Sorry!"

I reflexively shielded my head with my toolbox. Thankfully, there was nothing in Chiaki's hands which she could use to throw at me.





Also, that was the only time where I was especially grateful for the tough stance displayed by Chiaki's mom.

"Now, no quarrelling at the entrance. You two should get upstairs right now."

With that, she pushed Chiaki and me up the stairs. And there we were in Chiaki's messy room, surrounded by stacks and stacks of magazines as well as an air of silence. Just then, Chiaki's mom came in with a tray of drinks and snacks.

"..... Urm, alcohol's a little....." I waved my hands frantically when I saw the bottle of alcohol on the tray.

"Oh, but Chiaki's drinking already."

She's right! Lying on the floor were three mini Shaoxing wine flasks.

"Sheesh, you've done this several times already. You should know Nao doesn't drink."

Chiaki snatched the plate of snacks over and pushed her mom out of the room, along with the tray as well.

However, the room turned silent once more when we were left by ourselves in the room. Chiaki grabbed a handful of [kaki-pi](#) and dumped them into her mouth in frustration.

What should I do? I couldn't look her straight in the eyes at all.

After clearing the snacks and the wine, Chiaki heaved a long sigh and hugged a huge dolphin plushie before her chest.

"..... Mafuyu called."





Said Chiaki softly. I lifted my head in shock. With the dolphin plushie covering her face, I could not see her expressions clearly. However, it felt like her eyes were a little wet.

"She said she's heading to America. She won't be coming back to school again....."

I nodded.

"And she actually said sorry. That's so unfair of her. There's nothing I could say if she apologized, is there?"

Her words stabbed deeply into me.

I was wondering if I should apologize to Chiaki. But that was a wrong thought. "Sorry" is a cold, despicable curse used to end all forms of contact between people. I gripped hard onto the tool in my hand.

"Oh right, what are you here for, Nao? I'm currently..... urm, really drunk, and my mind's in a mess right now. I may just punch you or cry right in front of you, you know?"

I shifted my eyes onto the tool box once more, before exchanging gazes with Chiaki.

"..... I'm here to fix the record player."

The dolphin plushie slipped off from Chiaki's thighs.

"..... Eh?"





"Your gramophone's broken, isn't it? Think about it. Isn't it silly if you can't listen to a rare present which you've received from me?"

Chiaki looked towards the wall, tongue-tied. Nailed onto the wall with a thumb-tack was a vinyl record. It's <Sgt.Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band>.

"E-E-Ehhhh?"

It was only then that Chiaki noticed the toolbox next to me.

"Where's it? In the cupboard?"

"A-Ah, well, urm.....!"

Chiaki scooted onto her feet and dashed towards the cupboard with unsteady steps.

"You're not to look into the cupboard! Turn around!" She was fine with me coming into such a messy room, so I had no idea why she was banning me from looking into her cupboard. But I turned my head around anyway.

I opened up my toolbox as I faced the dusty old machine. First, I took out a plastic bag filled with replacement parts. I then wiped the machine clean with a wet towel.

It was tough working under the scrutiny of Chiaki's unwavering gaze, but my fingers were soon in the mood of fiddling with the machines. I replaced the gramophone's needle, adjusted the slanted turntable and located the short-circuits with a multimeter.





Easy. It's just a machine after all. All I had to do was to repair it if it's broken. There are lots of things in this world that are irreparable should they be broken.

After checking the spinning turntable with a flick of the switch, I looked in the direction of Chiaki.

"I wish to check if the sound's alright. May I?"

Chiaki shot a glance at the record on the wall. Her nod was so faint, it was barely detectable by the naked eyes.

I borrowed the audio cables from the sound system and connected it to the gramophone. I then placed the record on the turntable. There was a fuzzy feeling in my chest the moment I lowered the needle. There was a sweet noise.

Cheers flowed out from the boombox. Followed by an irritating guitar phrase. Then the brass instruments which overpowered the harmony of Paul, John and George.

I turned my head towards Chiaki, perhaps with a hint of smugness on my face. As for Chiaki, she was hugging onto a dolphin and a beaver plushie, curling herself up as if she were trying to hide from something. Her eyes were bearing into me — and the spinning turntable as well.

"..... Ah, s-sorry. U-Urm, I'm done."

Just as I was stretching my hands out to stop the record from spinning.

"Don't switch it off!"





I turned my head around. Chiaki's eyes were visibly filled with tears.

"It's okay. Let it run. I want to listen to it."

Chiaki then tossed a cushion in my direction, which knocked into my leg and dropped next to her.

We sat together and listened carefully to The Beatles amid the noise. The illusory concert created by stuffing the dreams of four into a nonsensical joke.

They did hold an actual concert years after the album was produced. It was held on the roof of a building — they did not publicize it, nor did they obtain any permits for it. They were then disbanded the following year.

I suddenly remembered a line Senpai said some time ago. It's very easy for someone to disappear one day, never to come back again.

She's right. Mafuyu has disappeared. All because of my stupidity.

Even so, Chiaki is still here by my side. Staying beside me.

Why?

"..... Why me? Are there no better guys out there?"

There was a strange atmosphere all of the sudden. Music that was flowing out of the boombox sounded as if it were produced by some cheap speakers instead. Chiaki sprang up in a really imposing manner. I then realized what I had said.

"W-W-Wha....."





Chiaki's trembling voice came from above me. I lifted my head timidly and saw Chiaki's blushing face between the dolphin and beaver plushies.

"W-What!? What did you just say!?"







"Urm, no, that's not what I meant..... No actually, I did mean it that way, but, u-urm....."

The beaver and dolphin plushies came smashing towards me.

"Idiot! Why must you say that at a time like this..... D-Do you even know how much I.....!"

I shielded my head with my arms with all my might. Aside from the furious attack of the plushies were the flying kicks of Chiaki as well. I could see from the slits of my arms that Chiaki was really crying.

That further confirmed my suspicions. I had done some really horrible things to Chiaki. She was always behind me, supporting me; she's there to knock on my tightly shut windows; she's always by my side, to the point where I took her body warmth for granted. But even so.....

The word "sorry" is a really despicable word — which was why I said nothing. Because I was in love with Mafuyu. Even though she was no longer around, I was still so deeply in love with her.....

"M-My....."

Pa. pa. The plushies were finally released from Chiaki's hands. Her knees collapse weakly onto the floor. She then gripped onto my shoulders and pulled her face over. My clothes were doused by her warmth.

"My feelings for Nao....."

Her words were swallowed up by her tears.





Just then, the music that was flowing out of the boombox was the banters of the oboe. It's <[When I'm Sixty-Four](#)>.

Paul McCartney's feigned youthful voice was causing Chiaki's shoulders to tremble.

Will you still need me, When I'm sixty-four?

And if you say the word, I could stay with you.

I could be handy mending a fuse, when your lights have gone.

Into the second verse, and Chiaki's shoulders were trembling even harder, and her hands which were gripping onto my shoulders were starting to twitch. She finally lifted her head when Paul reached the part about scrimping and saving and having grandchildren.

"— Ahahahahahahaha!"

Chiaki laid on the floor, laughing wildly as she faced the ceiling. She did not even notice the fact that she was squashing onto her plushies.

"A-Ahaha, w-what's this? W-Why did it play this song at a time like this? T-This is too much of a coincidence!"

Chiaki was rolling on the floor and laughing maniacally with her curled body. All I could do was look at her speechlessly.

It was indeed..... a coincidence.

In the end, Chiaki laughed all the way till the end of the song. When she sat up, her eyes were still red and puffy from her tears, but the gloominess which was shrouding her was all gone.





"Ahh~ Sheesh, this is terrible. How did I manage to laugh at a time like this? I don't get it."

With that said, she wiped the tears away from the corner of her eyes with her fingertip.

"U-Urm, Chiaki—"

"Say no more."

Chiaki's words forced my own words back into my throat. There was nothing I could say.

We humans can look so much more depressed when we are smiling. So that's actually true.

"It's okay. I understand."

She understood.

So Chiaki knew there was nothing I could do. That sentence hurts way more than the attack of the plushies and the kicks on my sides.

We then sat down side by side and listened to the rest of <Sgt.Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band>.

Neither of us said a word. However, from the remnant body heat on my shoulders as well as the slight pain carved onto my skin, I could tell that Chiaki had already moved forward, to a place that's out of my reach.





Despite the fact that we were sitting together side by side as usual, the nameless, illusionary warmth which had existed between us all this time was destroyed on that very night.

Therefore, the only thing I could rely on were the songs spewed out by the record.

The end to the live performance was approaching. <Sgt.Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band>'s words of farewell were swallowed up by the cloud-piercing roars of the crowds. It felt as though Mafuyu's footsteps were gradually approaching me. The piano prelude in <[A Day in the Life](#)> made me shed tears, as usual.

Even without turning my head, I knew Chiaki was crying once again.

Each and every news article sang by John.

The usual busy morning, woven together by Paul.

We had lived through it thousands of times already, and I am sure we will continue to weave it thousands times more. Ordinary but irreplaceable; the cruel everyday life.

"Let's perform live."

I said when the record was done, and the remnants of the piano were buzzing faintly around us.

"Even if Mafuyu's no longer around, the three of us will have to get on stage. Let's do our best performance together."





With her teary eyes fixed onto the boombox, Chiaki slowly nodded her head.

And then, the dog whistle — an almost inaudible shrill rang from the other side far away.





Chapter 14

Reindeer, Pajamas, MD

We were still arguing about our stage costumes the day before our performance.

"See, that's the last one. I win."

Kagurazaka-senpai prodded Chiaki's nose as she drew the last fry from the box.

"Why are you sounding like it's a given that you'll win?"

Said Chiaki in a weeping tone as she slumped onto her chair.

December 23rd. Since the practice room was out of bounds during winter break, we were at a studio located on the third floor of the music store Kagurazaka-senpai works at. We were done with the rehearsal and had just reached the studio not too long ago. Instead of discussing on our performance during the rehearsal, Senpai and Chiaki were rattling about the costumes and the MC instead. As for me, I was not too pleased about our performance earlier, so I lowered the volume of my bass and played it silently.

"But I've even made the reindeer antlers already!"

Chiaki puffed her cheeks and put on the beautifully-crafted antlers on both sides of her head. Senpai's proposal, in which everyone wears white, clashed violently with Chiaki's proposal of "Santa





Claus and reindeers". Therefore, they decided to settle it all with McDonald's fries. The rule was really simple — the person who picks the last fry wins. They said it requires some rather complicated strategy (really?), but I was focusing my attention on the bass during their duel. I hardly took any notice of them till Chiaki was yelling about when they were down to the last few strands.

"Oh right! You should duel with Senpai too, Nao! It's better for us to wear costumes related to Christmas, isn't it?"

"Not interested. Let's begin with the practice already." Also, no food in the studio.

"You're not pleased about the rehearsal? Even the producer, who was complaining non-stop prior to the rehearsal, piped down after listening to our performance."

The organisers were not pleased when we submitted our application for a change in our group members after Mafuyu left the band, though that was something to be expected. That's because the judges were most impressed by Mafuyu's solo performance where she played through the first stanza by herself in <Happy Xmas>. The three of us rearranged the song in an attempt to convince the organisers. In the end, the producer who was hell bent on booting us out of the concert finally gave in after listening to our rehearsal.

However, I still can't forgive myself for my immaturity. There was a person amongst the people listening to our rehearsal who was visibly displeased with it — that's Furukawa, who performed with us on stage. He was probably not used to the shallowness of our timbre since Mafuyu's departure.





And so I let the girls decide on our costumes and immersed myself back into the bass of my Aria Pro II.

"Anyway, it's decided. All white. Comrade Aihara, you can wear hot pants if you want."

"Uhh— Reindeers....."

Despite her reluctance, Chiaki gave in. I heaved a silent sigh of relief. That's because the person in the reindeer costume will be, without a doubt, me. I probably won't be able to play due to my embarrassment if that were really the case.

"You've got the guts to challenge me despite knowing you'll lose. Are you that insistent on being a Santa Claus?"

"Because I wrote to Mafu-Mafu saying we'll be dressing up as Santa Claus, so she'll have to come down to watch us. I even sent her a ticket."

My fingers stopped strumming from my surprise. I turned my head around.

"..... Chiaki mailed her a ticket too?"

Chiaki's eyes widened.

"You too?"

"Yeah, but....."

I was about to say it should be my job, but I swallowed back my words. That's really selfish of me.





"If you're gonna give her a ticket, you should do it by heading to her house without hesitation! Or at the very least, you should give her a call! You wimp!"

Harsh, but very true. I clamped my bass between my knees in dismay.

Ever since that day—

Mafuyu never came back to school, and the second semester ended just like that. Miss Maki came to me on the day before the ending ceremony and told me Mafuyu had already cleared the procedures necessary to quit school.

"That's amazing. So every one of us mailed her a ticket huh."

Murmured Senpai as she stared blankly into space. So you mailed her one as well?

"Just to add on, I've written my name on the ticket. I wonder whose ticket she'll bring along with her tomorrow. This battle will be quite an interesting one, don't you think?"

Chiaki and I did not respond.

Mafuyu's probably not coming. That was my hunch.

And it all ends without any words after that. As the red lights flashed above the door to the studio signalling the end of our session, we were chased out of the room.





It was pitch black outside. It was almost nine. As I looked through the crowded buildings into the sky, my vision was obscured by the dark clouds which shrouded it. The air was incredibly cold, to the point where my hands may just snap off from my wrists if I did not place them in my pockets. After bidding the shopkeeper goodbye, I walked out of the door and wrapped the scarf around my neck a few times before tucking it into the collar of my coat.

"Young man, you're going to give up like this?"

Asked Senpai as she sat on the road barrier. The lights from the store were shining onto Chiaki's face, who was standing right next to Senpai. She too, was staring straight into me.

From then on, Senpai held true to her words and did not show me her smile anymore. However, the way she interacted with Chiaki was as usual, so that made things even more painful. Then again, it might be Senpai who's hurting even more.

"She'll be heading for America early next year, isn't that so? Why don't you go see her?"

I couldn't give her an answer, so I stared at my fingers, where the skin was all dried up and peeling off. And since I strummed my bass with my fingers, the situation was worse at my right hand.

"Are you planning to escape into your bass?"

Kagurazaka-senpai's tone was not a teasing one, neither was she lecturing me. She was just trying to confirm things. I nodded my head honestly.

There's no concrete or sound reason for that. It was just me having no idea what expression I should wear on my face when I see





Mafuyu. But when I realized I may not get to see her again, I was really scared.

Ebichiri said they'll need to stay in America for two months — that means she could return back to school. However, Mafuyu changed that plan. One whole year. She's cutting herself off from us for a shockingly long period of time. I could not understand the reason behind Mafuyu's decision.

Because she does not want to see me anymore — I refused to think about reasons like that.

So for the past two weeks, I had been staying up late into the night to do some arrangements, as well as to work on the program of the synthesizer. I was way too engrossed in them, so that resulted in me failing three of my subjects. The strings of my bass snapped twice as well.

I won't have to think about Mafuyu as long as I am busy with the band. Isn't that much easier? — I thought to myself. But that was not the case. Because everything I was doing was so that I could make up for the broken right wing of feketerigó. The place which belonged to Mafuyu.

Be it when I was sampling the sounds of my bass with the synthesizer, or when I was discussing with Senpai on how to rearrange the song to make it so that it's a single phrase, I would be torn apart by the fact that Mafuyu was not around anymore.

I couldn't forget about Mafuyu. Not even for a brief moment.

Music's no longer my place for shelter as well. I was just forced to cling hard onto it and wait.





"..... The only thing I have in mind now is the live performance. Though I have no idea what I should do after that."

I finally replied with a hoarse voice.

It's the Christmas concert which Mafuyu said we have to perform in.

At the very least, I hope to fulfill her wish.

"Nao has not grown a single bit."

Said Chiaki as she shielded her white breaths with her gloved hands. Her legs were swinging about to-and-fro. I knew she was not dissing me, but her words stung nevertheless.

"Nope, not necessarily."

Senpai would turn towards Chiaki whenever she's smiling.

"He might have circled back to the place he came from, but despite being all battered up, he can stand up on his own two feet now. If that's not called growing up, then I've no idea what is."

"Senpai's still as gentle towards Nao, as usual."

"I'm still far off from you, Comrade Aihara."

The two girls were smiling at each other amid their warm radiance, leaving me by my lonesome in the cold night.

Chiaki jumped off the barrier and dusted the dirt off the back of her pants. As for Senpai, she retrieved her bicycle from the back of the building.





"Looks like it's precipitating. Will it be snow?"

Murmured Senpai as she gazed at the starless sky.

"I really want to perform <Happy Xmas>, but I guess it can't be helped."

We had originally planned to use that song in our encore, but we decided not to perform it in the actual concert. The original arrangement that we came up with was for Mafuyu's guitar to perform solo in the first phrase, and there were no other alternatives which we could come up with.

The smile on Senpai's face disappeared as she looked at Chiaki and me.

"No matter how hard we try, even if we exceed our limits, we can only hit 75% of what feketerigó originally was. It's depressing, but that's the fact. But even so....."

She stretched out her right hand.

"Let's turn it into the best Christmas ever."

Chiaki and I nodded as we stacked our hands above hers. But the weight and the warmth was lacking. Perhaps Senpai noticed that, so she stacked her left hand above ours.

Back home, Tetsurou and I took turns to bathe after I was done fixing him his dinner. I prepared the clothes for my performance just as the washing machine was tumbling about. I'll be wearing a





long-sleeved open-collared shirt which I had borrowed, and on top of it is a white suit.

There's quite a bit of luggage as well — there's the bass, effect unit and synthesizers. I checked the items once more.

I then booted up the computer. It was working fine during the rehearsal, but I plugged in my earphones, the effect unit and my bass to check if it was working fine.

Crap, I was not the least bit sleepy. The concert will start tomorrow at noon. It will be pretty damn bad if I were to stay up all night, only to snooze off in the morning from my tiredness and oversleep. However, my cheeks were burning from the excitement which remained in my body during the rehearsal and the practice. I pressed the bass' body onto my face. The coldness was really comfortable.

It felt like I was doing something really stupid, so I opened up the windows. The heat on my body dropped a little as the cold air blew against my cheeks. The tree — the one which Chiaki used to climb up all the time, and which Mafuyu used once as well — appeared amid the rays of the street-lights. The leaves were already gone. I could see something white fluttering down between the thin shadows.

Snow. It was snowing.

The only moving things in the strangely silent night were the illuminated snow floating past the street-lights. The asphalt was still pitch black as of now, but snow should begin to accumulate as the night continues. I wonder if it will be okay for the trains to operate tomorrow. Hopefully, the service will not be halted.





Just as I was about to shut the windows due to the bitter cold, I saw a golden silhouette shimmering beneath the street-lights.

I couldn't quite see clearly past the branches of the treetop, so I stretched out my head subconsciously.

I saw it right, there is someone there. Someone outside my courtyard. A skinny person was standing next to the short metal fence, looking at his surroundings. Is he looking in my direction? His golden hair shimmered occasionally under the light.

Golden hair?

I pressed my stomach against the window frame and stretched my body outwards as much as I can without taking a plunge.

He's Yuri, carrying something black behind him — it's a guitar casing. Yuri, with the guitar case on his back, was standing between the lamp-post and the fence, peeking towards my direction. What the hell is he doing there in the middle of the snowing night?

I ran down the stairs, put on my shoes and dashed out of the house without even putting a coat on. When I reached his proximity, Yuri was about to give up and leave.

"Yuri!"

My voice was surprisingly clear even though it was snowing. The silhouette with the guitar casing on his back stopped in his track.

"..... Naomi."





Yuri turned around. His face was ghastly white, his lips were purple. It seemed like he had rushed out of his house in a hurry, since he was not wearing a coat.

"W-What the hell are you doing? You'll catch a cold like this!"

"U-Urm, sorry. I'm sorry."

I sprinted towards him. Yuri then collapsed into my chest just like that.

"..... I ran here."

What does he mean by that? 'It's snowing, so put on a coat at the very least'..... Just as I was about to say that, I realized it was not the time to be lecturing him when I came into contact with his shivering and icy skin. I brought him into the house. Tetsurou, fresh from his bath, was walking out of the changing room just then. "I'll bring you a change of clothes, so get in," I said as I pushed Yuri into the bathroom. Yuri's clothes were wet due to the snow, so I grabbed my pajamas from the second floor then ran to the kitchen to heat up some water. When I returned to the living room and heaved a sigh of relief, Tetsurou, who was drying his hair with a towel, asked briefly,

"So? What's going on?"

"Well, I'll like to know as well."

Come to think of it, why does he know where I live?

"That's Julien Flaubert, right?"

"Yeah."





"So Nao's abilities as an industry's ruffian have already exceeded those of mine, huh....." What are you talking about?

"Oh yeah, I wonder how much his bathing photos will sell for."

"I'm really gonna severe all relationships between us, yeah?"

"Oh geez, it's just a joke, Nao! Damn, you are sure a possessive little kid."

"Shut up and get back to work!"

Just as I was chasing Tetsurou about in the house with a cushion in my hand, Yuri walked into the living room with a towel wrapped around his head. The pajamas was hanging loosely on his body.







"Are you okay now? Feeling warmer?"

I tossed the cushion towards Tetsurou and urged Yuri to take a seat on the sofa.

"M-Mmm..... thanks."

A post-bath Yuri's cheek was flushed red like an apple. He took a look at Tetsurou and lowered his head.

"Sorry for interrupting you so late at night."

"No problem. Oh yeah, remember me? My name's Hikawa Tetsurou. I may not look like it, but I am a pretty famous critic in the industry. I was the one who wrote the explanatory notes in the program guide when you first came to Japan to perform."

"I wasn't that good with Japanese back then."

"No problem, don't you mind. Oh right, can you offer me an exclusive interview as well as a coloured cover-shot? Your manager's a pain in the ass to deal with."

"Enough with all the touting, get back to the study already!"

"Didn't you ask me to get to work? Touting persistently regardless of the time and place is a basic skill required from an industry's ruffian!"

My head's aching again, so I brought Yuri to my room on the second floor.

"Ah, sorry for that. That's the way my Dad is." I scratched my head and sat on the floor.





Yuri, who was sitting on my bed, giggled as he held onto a steaming cup of water in his hand.

"It's nothing. He's an interesting person, just like Naomi."

Don't say that even if you mean it as a joke.

Yuri scanned the room. "So this is Naomi's room." For some unknown reason, he was swinging his legs about happily. What? Is my room that interesting? I had just shifted the synthesizer and my bass out of my room, so there were a few remaining cables lying around on the floor. I was a little embarrassed by the untidiness of my room.

"You do soak yourself in music. Is this the norm for you?"

"Nope, I was just preparing for the live performance."

The smile disappeared from Yuri's face instantly. For a long while, he did nothing but hold onto the cup tightly.

Actually, I had not seen Yuri for a while since that day in the orchestra's practice room at Shinagawa. The same day when I last saw Mafuyu. The day where our wings were broken.

Perhaps it was damaged way before that, it was just me who was oblivious to everything.

"Tomorrow's..... the live performance, right?"

Yuri placed the cup on his knees and said softly.





"Sorry for coming over all of the sudden. You're not angry, are you?"

"No problem. But how did you know where my house is?" I don't remember telling him my address.

"I got it from Kyouko."

Senpai huh? Why? Also, are they on close terms with each other?

"Urm, well, where's my guitar?"

"Ah, I placed it on the corridor. I'll get it."

When I brought the guitar case up to my room, Yuri opened it up and took out something from within.

I held my breath.

Blazing beneath the lights was the vintage sunburst-coloured Stratocaster. All I needed was a brief look. There's no mistaking it. It's Mafuyu's guitar.

Why is it in Yuri's possession? No wait, this Stratocaster belongs to Yuri in the first place.

"Mafuyu returned this to me. I didn't ask for it back."

I lifted my head quickly. Didn't Mafuyu say it was confiscated by Ebichiri? Why is it in Yuri's possession? So she lied? Why?

Yuri hugged the Stratocaster tightly in his bosom and sat onto my bed once more.





"..... Mafuyu changed the planned schedule for her treatment. She's probably not returning for a year."

"Mmm, I heard."

And I knew it was Mafuyu's decision as well.

"Also, she said she'll be studying there."

"..... Mmm."

Really? Makes sense. She did quit our school already. Mafuyu has already planned to live on the other side of the ocean. In a country where I am not around.

"Did you hear about the hospital where she'll be going to?"

"Eh? No." Well, it's not like it'll help if I know.

"I heard it's in California. It's a university hospital that is famous for its sports medicine."

Sports medicine?

"So I say," Yuri gripped hard onto the neck of the Stratocaster and heaved a painful sigh, "Mafuyu injured her wrist because I taught her the wrong way of playing the guitar. It was harsh for her wrist. It's said that the hospital is visited by many musicians."

"So she'll be rehabilitating so that she can play the piano once more?"

"There are quite a number of guitarists who went there before. I know of a few."





I stared at Yuri's face blankly.

"The strength in Mafuyu's fingers and wrists are very weak, and she learned the wrong way of playing as well. That's why she has to practice correctly from scratch, so that she can play the guitar once more. That's the reason why it'll be taking her a year."

And the guitar as well?

Why? I couldn't breathe.

Didn't Mafuyu abandon the guitar already? No, but, the Stratocaster's here.

And 75% of feketerigó is still around.

"So she did not tell Naomi about it."

Yuri's voice sounded like he was close to tears.

"I did ask Mafuyu about it. Why she is keeping it a secret from Naomi and leaving just like that?"

I shifted my body towards Yuri and asked,

"What did Mafuyu say? What did she say?"

Why don't you ask her yourself, you useless wimp? — A voice reverberated painfully within my mind.

"She refused to say anything. I don't know, I have no idea. Because even though Mafuyu liked Naomi so much; even though she could have returned in just two months, and then she can be





together with Naomi once more. Wouldn't that be great? But Mafuyu, she....."

Yuri sobbed as he hugged onto the Stratocaster tightly. I collapsed onto the floor.

Why? Right now, at this very moment, Mafuyu had finally conveyed her feelings clearly to me. Getting back the piano and returning back to my side is not enough. Mafuyu's a quarter of feketerigó as well. She loves the band very, very much.

Even if she has to be separated in another country for an unimaginable amount of time.

She has to get her wings back.

"Why? There's no need for her to leave silently like this. I hate it. Mafuyu and Naomi both looked so sad, I don't want to see you two like this."

"That's because....."

I had done something really horrible to Mafuyu.

I thought Mafuyu will never be coming back again.

"She'll definitely be coming back! Naomi you idiot! Don't you understand that much?"

Yuri dumped the Stratocaster onto the bed, jumped off from it and landed before me. He then leaned forward with his hands on my knees, his eyes filled with tears.





"She's doing her best so that she can return, so that she can play the guitar once more. Why? Why is Naomi always like this? Why can't you just do your best to see her even if it's not possible? She'll be leaving Japan soon, there's not much time left to see her, you know?"

I understand what you're saying. But.....

"When are you going to muster the courage needed? If all you're doing is to wait, you'll never be able to muster the courage required!"

I almost fainted from Yuri's words, which hit me really hard on my head. I knelt, hands on the ground, at the edge of my bed.

Mafuyu's doing it all for the guitar and the sake of the band.

So that she can soar above my pulsations once more?

But Mafuyu didn't tell me that. Is it because she fears that everything may fail? Or is it because she lacks the courage, just like the way I am?

If so, then we are both doing some incredibly stupid things.

I could feel body warmth leaning onto my back. Yuri had buried his face into it.

"I'm sorry, Naomi."

"..... Why are you apologizing?"

Human beings will not improve the tiniest bit if they have to apologize after they are done scolding an idiot as one.





But Yuri's warmth was leaving my back slowly. Then came a zipping sound. When I turned around, he had already packed the guitar back into its case.

"I can't stand it. I should not be the one who's telling you this. Because Mafuyu is just as silly, just as cowardly and just as stubborn. However, I like Mafuyu, and I like Naomi too. It hurts so much. I'll become all fidgety whenever I think of how everything's my fault. I could not hold back any longer when Mafuyu returned the guitar to me, so I asked Kyouko to tell me your address. I then ran my way here."

I shook my head. It's not Yuri's fault, but I had no intention of consoling him with empty words like these.

"But Naomi's dense as usual. All you are thinking of is the concert."

Sorry for that — I rebutted him in reflex.

"I've promised Mafuyu that I'll do the best live performance ever. She'll definitely not forgive me if I am to deliberately play badly. Therefore....."

"That's just you being pointlessly stubborn."

Stubborn? He said I'm stubborn? That's right. I stood up and drew out a MD from the pocket of my bass casing. I then slot it into the audio system.

"..... What's this?" Yuri came over and peeked into the system.

"The recording for today's rehearsal."





The proof of my stubbornness.

The harmony of Chiaki's hi-hat and Senpai's plucks began to play, coming closer and closer as if it were the sounds of a bell. The toms were hitting to an ethnic rhythm; the baseline was vibrant; the melody line from the synthesizer at which the modulation effect was stretched to its limits.

Yuri dropped onto the floor.

What an irony. What was originally supposed to be played by four where everyone gives in their all, the sounds have become depressingly clear when the head count was reduced to three.

Finally, Yuri picked up my bass that was lying on the floor.

For a countless number of times, I had witnessed and listened live to the superb performances from people like Kagurazaka-senpai, Mafuyu and Furukawa, and were depressed as a result. However, the blows were nothing compared to what I am feeling now. Yuri's slender fingers were skipping around, reproducing the melody of my bass to perfection by pacing himself impeccably to the feketerigó that was flowing out from the MD.

"Your techniques have improved, Naomi."

Doesn't sound like he was praising me. I was not the least bit happy. If only these geniuses can be locked in their glass casing forever and never come out.

"Because you have placed everything related to Mafuyu aside and focused on practicing."





"Just shut up. It'll be even more amazing on the actual performance! Come on down and see for yourself if you're free tomorrow."

I grumbled in chagrin. Yuri stuck out his tongue.

"I'm having a break tomorrow, but there's no way I'll be attending the concert."

Ah, is that so? Fine. I was throwing up a tantrum in my mind, so I remained quiet.

"Because there's only the three of you on stage. It should not be too far off from this recording, right?"

Nope, don't you underestimate a live performance. But I still remained silent.

"The MD's more than enough. Why's the quality so good though?"

"Because I had first recorded the sounds of the band into the effect unit already. When the system is done reading and processing it, it will then be played by the synthesizer. So all I have to do is to hook the MD up to the synthesizer and I can record stuff easily."

Oh — Yuri put on an uninterested expression and shifted his gaze to my bass. He then heaved a sigh and stood up.

"..... Well then, I'll be leaving. Naomi's got to wake up early tomorrow as well."

"Eh? Wait, hold on. Your clothes are not dried yet, you know? And it's still snowing heavily outside....."





Yuri opened his eyes wide and stared at the pajamas on his body. He's not planning to leave while dressed up like this, is he?

"Urm, well, but....."

"Why don't you just crash over for the night, Julien Flaubert? Us two men are the only people living in this house, so there's no need for you to be all concerned. Hey Nao, get moving! Clear up the floor and lay a futon down!"

"When the hell did you begin with your eavesdropping, Tetsurou!?"

I threw a pillow in the direction of the gap of the opened door. Heh, heh, heh — the disgusting laughter had moved to the floor below. That bastard.

I took a glance at Yuri. He lifted his eyes to look at me.

"..... Is it really okay for me to stay?"

My heart will skip a beat if you ask me with that expression of yours.

"M-Mmm."

After pushing all my luggage for the live performance into a corner of my room, I laid a futon on the floor and looked at the time. It's about time when the last train departs. There's a live rehearsal tomorrow as well, so I'll have to get up early.

Goodnight — I said softly as I switched off the light and squeezed into the blanket. Various sounds from today were swirling about in my brain. "Young man, you're going to give up like this?" asked Senpai. "Nao has not grown a single bit," commented Chiaki





irritably. The sounds of the heart beats created by the harmony of the hi-hat and the bass. The slew of irritating requests made by the organisers. The train skidding across the icy railway.

"— Naomi."

Someone called me all of the sudden. I pulled my blanket away.

Amid the darkness, I could see Yuri sitting up from the futon.

"What's up?"

"Can I sleep on your bed?"

It was dark, so he probably could not see the stupid, dumbfounded expression on my face.

"W-W-Why?"

Is it too cold? Does he want to swap beds?

"Naomi will not just disappear, will you?" Yuri's voice was filled with unrest. "I'm so scared. You won't disappear like Mafuyu will, right? It feels like everyone..... everyone will disappear when I close my eyes. It's so frightening."

"I won't disappear. I'm right here."

I was troubled by the unfounded unease from Yuri.

"Y-You're not..... angry at me, are you? You don't hate me, do you? B-Because..... it's all..... it's all my fault. It's the same with Mafuyu as well. If only I did not teach her the guitar....."





At a distance not far away from my arm, Yuri had buried his face into the blanket and remained silent.

It's not Yuri's fault — there was no way I could say that. Because that's a lie. The reason Mafuyu's right hand was broken was because Yuri taught her how to play the guitar.

However, I stroked Yuri's silky hair gently.

"I never would have met Mafuyu if Yuri had not taught her how to play the guitar."

And Senpai too. And of course, I would not have met Yuri as well.

And the blazing passion on stage, as well as the sweet taste of searing hot sweat.

And the true beauty of music.

"I'm not angry. It's probably the same for Mafuyu as well. There's no way she'll hate Yuri."

"— Really?"

"Yeah."

"But I'm still scared. I'm afraid that everyone will disappear when I wake up."

Yuri gripped hard onto my wrist and gave a painful moan. I heaved a sigh. What a headache. He's just like a kid. No actually, he is still one. And I am too. Since Yuri's a year younger than me, he's only a middle school student based on his age.





"Mmm, s-sure, if you want. But my bed's really small."

Yuri's squeezed his petite body into my bed. I could hear a sob coming from him.

Well, it's not a big deal since we're both guys. But I'm a little nervous nevertheless. I turned away so that my back was facing Yuri.

"..... Naomi....."

He muttered my name weakly. His breath was caressing my neck.

Moreover, his body warmth was pressing gently onto my back.

Can I really fall asleep? I began to worry about things that were totally different from what I was worrying about a while ago. Then again, he's French, and he did mention how he used to sleep together with Mafuyu on the same bed before. Perhaps he's used to doing this all the time. It has got to be a difference in culture.

I guess I shouldn't be worrying about stuff like that as well. All I have to think about is the live performance tomorrow.

Surprisingly, all the noises that were swirling in my head had gradually disappeared, as though they were sucked away by Yuri's warmth.

Finally, I surrendered peacefully to my drowsiness.





Chapter 15

Snow, Footlights, Knot

When I woke up, I was embraced by a pair of slender arms circling me from my back to my chest. What's going on here? The tip of my nose came into contact with soft, silky hair when I flipped my body in my blanket. I was greeted by a cute and angelic sleeping face right before my eyes. I was about to retreat in shock, but he then gave a nasal "mmm" moan and buried his face into his arm.

Oh right, that's Yuri. We slept together last night. He may be a guy, but having to wake up to someone with a body as slender as his on your bed, and a face that is so incredibly feminine appearing right before your eyes — it's really not good for the heart.

Moving carefully so as not to wake him up, I slowly moved my body away from his arms and got off my bed. A chilly, creaking sound came from the floor. I had no idea what time it was since it was still pretty dark. It shows nine o'clock on the display of the sound system. Well, since it's so dark, that means..... as I pulled the curtains apart, my eyes were blinded by the snow-white world. My barely awakened body was shivering to the freezing cold. The roads, roofs, courtyard and fence were all covered up in snow. Fragments of the sky were fluttering downwards slowly from the grey clouds.

It's a white Christmas.





Somehow, everything before my eyes seemed unreal. I would not be surprised if everything was just a dream, starting from yesterday when Yuri came to my house. However, when I stretched my hand out of the window, my body heat was indeed drained away by the air as my skin came into contact with the silent chill.

My sleepiness was peeled layer by layer away from me. As I closed the windows and turned my body around, I could still see the blonde boy sleeping on my bed. This isn't a dream. Not Yuri, not the snow, and not the performance which we'll be having today.

Guess I'll leave my house earlier today, since it will take a fair bit of effort to get to my destination due to the heavy snow. After I was done changing into my performance wear, I heaved the bass and the synthesizer onto my back and walked out of the room. Even as I walked down the short distance along the narrow stair, it felt like my back was about to break. Since Yuri said he's taking a break today, I guess it'll be better not to wake him up as he should be pretty drained out.

"Oh, morning, Nao. Had a fantastic night?"

"And here I'm wondering why the hell you're up this early, Tetsurou..... Rather than saying idiotic stuff like that, shouldn't you be doing something else instead? There should be lots of things waiting for you to do, aren't there? Like the laundry, for example."

I threw a towel in the direction of Tetsurou's scruffy face, which popped out from within the living room.

"I'm really busy in the morning. There are children's shows and anime waiting."





I was in no mood to reply to that, so I walked weakly towards the kitchen instead. I had no intention of wasting my energy on pointless stuff like that since today's the day of the performance.

"What about Julien Flaubert? Is he still asleep?"

"Yeah. He said he's resting today, so cook him something when he wakes up before sending him to the station."

"Can we hold a photo-shoot session in our house? No no no I'm just kidding! Nao! Don't put on such a frightening expression while you're holding onto a knife!" Tetsurou scooted back towards the dining room. "Speaking of which, I thought he'll be going to the concert along with you. Isn't that the reason he came here?"

"Nope, he said he's not going."

Oh? — Tetsurou scratched his tilted head and left just like that.

I know Yuri's angry. He's probably not interested in feketerigó without Mafuyu, regardless of whether we played well or not. Same goes for me too. If so, what's the reason I'm still standing on the stage? Even though there's just the three of us left.

Am I just being stubborn, just as Yuri had said?

Or is it just to savour the sweet excitement during the performance?

Or to bathe myself in the glittering stage-lights and the cheers?





It might be all of the above, or it might be none of those reasons at all. Our forefathers had left us a magical curse which can explain everything at any given situation.

If you ask me why, it's because it's rock 'n roll.

After I was done with breakfast, I prepared myself fully by wearing a raincoat over my windbreaker. Both bass and synthesizer casings were all wrapped up in huge plastic bags as well.

The sky was a little brighter when I walked out of my house, but the snow was showing no signs of stopping. Since the snow was fine as it was precipitating in a pretty low temperature, my boots sank halfway into the them when I stepped out of the door. It wasn't exactly impossible to walk, but I did have a lot of luggage on me. I was seriously regretting how I should have left the synthesizer at the venue after we were done with the rehearsal yesterday.

As I walked out of the courtyard, I was greeted by Chiaki, who was waiting for me there. As the drummer, she need not bring anything along with her, so she was holding onto an umbrella instead. Perhaps as a tiny rebellion against the decision made by Senpai, Chiaki wore a red coat which reminded me of Santa Claus.

"Morning! Pass me the synthesizer."

"I was thinking of meeting you at your house."

"You'll have to wait a hundred years to be earlier than me."





Smiled Chiaki as she snatched the synthesizer case away from my hands. I originally wanted to offer her the bass instead since the synthesizer was much heavier, but she was already walking swiftly towards the station with the case on her back.

"Had a good night's sleep? Nao's the type who will think about all sorts of things on the day before a performance."

"Ah, yeah."

I thought it's a given not to be able to sleep with Yuri pressing himself onto my back, but for some reason I had slept really well instead. Perhaps it's because I was at ease having experienced the warmth of a human being. But that's something I'll never say to Chiaki.

"I guess I won't be able to rehearse thanks to my frozen hands."

"You'll just have to stick the pair of drum sticks onto your hands with chewing gums or something."

"Ahaha, why don't Nao stick his mouth shut with chewing gum as well?"

"I can't sing like that."

"You can hum to the song instead."

Strange, why am I feeling calmer as I approach the performance venue? Mafuyu's probably not coming, so there's no way we'll be able to convey our rock music. And even though I know that..... No wait, perhaps it's precisely because I knew?





I wanted to tell Chiaki the stuff I heard from Yuri — things like the hospital where Mafuyu will be going to. However, I couldn't find the opportunity to say it to her amidst our banters.

Located at the basement of the largest entertainment center in the city where we lived in is the club where we'll be doing our battle.

The shopping complex was filled with people despite the heavy snow outside. I could hear <Jingle Bells> amidst the background noise from the shopping mall's entrance which was decorated with flashing lights. Chiaki and I walked out of the station, both of us filled with sweat. It felt like the sweat on my forehead was freezing as the chilling wind blew its way past the corridor.

Walking down the escape stairs and into a private corridor, we went through a door with a <Staff Only> sign and reached the backstage. I could see her back and her braided long, black hair amid the workers which were running busily about with earphones on their head — Kagurazaka-senpai was already there.

Standing next to her were two men whom I knew. The muscular, tanned guy was Tomo. The tall one with blonde hair's Hiroshi of Melancholy Chameleon, Furukawa's partner. What's Hiroshi doing there?

"Morning, everyone. Pass your instruments to the staff. They'll take care of it."

Said Senpai suddenly as she turned her body around. She noticed our presence earlier than Tomo or Hiroshi did even though she had her back against us.

Speaking of which, Senpai's attire was pretty shocking. Despite the heavy snow outside, she was wearing a mini-skirt along with a





tube top, which revealed her arms and her belly button. To top it off, she had on her feet a pair of white boots as well. It was uniformly white — all she needed was a laser gun and she'd look like a heroine who had stepped out of a B-rated science-fiction movie.

"Whoa! Won't you feel cold like this, Senpai?"

"I'll be releasing an unbearable amount of heat within and outside my body later on. Comrade Aihara, you should remove your coat too."

Chiaki's red coat was removed away from her body in an instant. You're wearing a white tube top as well, ain't you? I don't even know where I should be looking at.

"Nao's the only one who's not dressed to kill."

Shrugged Tomo in disappointment.

"You might as well play the bass behind the stage. It'll be much more popular with the crowd if Kyouko and Chiaki's the only one on stage."

Hiroshi rubbed salt into my wounds by snickering teasingly.

"Urm, well, why are you here?"

I could understand Tomo's presence since he's part of the performing members, but why Hiroshi?

"That Taisei, he wanted me to be the MC as well as the chorus for the performance. Said stuff like he's used to the way I talk, so it's





much easier to stage the show with me. It's not like I'm a comedian or anything."

Hiroshi grimaced. What, so it's the usual bunch whom we were used to seeing. We did not see any of the other performers yesterday since we headed straight to the studio after we were done with the rehearsal.

"Well then Kyouko, see you later."

Hiroshi and Tomo disappeared within the curtains which led to the backstage. Is Furukawa there as well? I'm still not too good with dealing with him, so I was lucky we did not bump into him immediately.

"You two, come here."

Senpai waved her hands in our direction as she walked to the side of the stage where the footlights were located.

This club has a pretty weird layout. I couldn't quite understand it even though it was already my third time here. Between the ground and the incredibly high ceilings were multiple layers of dance-floors, which looked just like Escher's deceiving drawings. There were small 'islands' linked together by multiple flight of stairs as well as two large hexagonal stages located at a very high place.

"We should be able to see everything since we will be performing at a place this high up in the air. We'll spot her immediately if she does come."

Who is she referring to? Chiaki and I did not ask her that question.





If it's Senpai, she should be able to spot the pair of sapphire eyes and the maroon-coloured hair even if she's performing amidst the darkness and dancing spotlights.

However, all three of us knew there's the possibility that she will not show up.

My feelings were calm as usual when I reached the club. Is it because of the snow? — I thought to myself. It felt as though all of my feelings were sucked away by the pure white world.

All Christmas songs were songs about departures. Perhaps that's the reason.

And so, being in the depths of the mall; having sunk into a sticky mire of darkness, the heat of the crowd as well as the lights which were scratching against our skin, it felt like my chest was burning up once more.

I hope you will come.

I want to see you.

I want to see you, Mafuyu.

The four rhythmic strikes of the bass drum shook the walls and the ceiling. The footsteps from the crowd as well as the roaring cheers were seeping through the concrete.

Different from the cramped live house, there is an actual preparation room located along the corridor of the backstage. The rooms are about half a classroom wide each. To the right of the





room was a desk, and to the left were well arranged cabinets. Since there were many performers around, the room was filled with instruments, costumes, sound systems and people.

As the group which will be going on stage next, we stood ourselves at a place closer to the exit. Chiaki and Kagurazaka-senpai were chatting with the men from the hip-hop group who will be performing right after us. High school students? For real? I heard rumours about an incredible group during the auditions, so that's you guys? How about a drink after the concert? Good idea, let's go on an outing next time. They were hooking up the girls pretty blatantly, but I was not aware of my surroundings. Instead, I was quietly listening to the vibrations coming from the stage as I sat on the chair, hugging onto one of my knees.

However, there's no way I'll know if Mafuyu was there from just that.

Perhaps it'll be better if I don't know. I should allow time to flow past me as I get myself blinded by the footlights and stage-lights. And carry the beautiful illusion that she might have been there into my dreams.

The two groups before us were about to end their performances. Aside from the MCs and the interludes from the DJs, the performances between the six groups will go on non-stop. That's the reason they had prepared two stages for us. The other group waiting on the other stage will have to prepare themselves by getting on stage early.

It's about time.

The door to the preparation room opened. I stood up. A female staff popped her head through the door.





"Mr. Hikawa from feketerigó, someone's outside looking....."

Senpai and Chiaki, who were behind me, reacted way quicker than I did as they pushed their chairs away and sprang up in an instant. My knees were trembling. Could it be Mafuyu?

When I walked towards the corridor, a small silhouette dashed towards me.

"Naomi!"

Blonde hair came flying out from the hood of a coat, followed by a pair of red ears and the red tip of his nose. I was so confused. Yuri? And not just that. Leaning onto the wall of the corridor and brushing off the snow away from his overalls was—

"U-Uncle Tetsurou?"

Chiaki gave a weird shriek when she ran into the corridor.

"Yo! I'm here to see the performance, Chiaki!"

Tetsurou, with his scrubby face and his hair all messed up, waved his hands with a smile.

Why? Why is Tetsurou and Yuri here?

"W-Well, I got him to drive me here since I can't reach Naomi through his phone."

Said Yuri as he hugged onto me tightly. Tetsurou drove him here? Why did he do that? And didn't you say you won't be watching our performance?





"Maestro Ebisawa just gave me a call."

I held my breath. Kagurazaka-senpai pushed Chiaki away on her back and walked to my side.

"They said they've managed to get the tickets on the waiting list. They'll be heading off on the four o'clock flight."

It felt like my head was buried in snow or something — it took me a long while before I finally understood what Yuri was saying. Four o'clock flight? What does he mean by that? Four in the afternoon, today?

Isn't that two hours later?

"Why so sudden!?"

Chiaki questioned Yuri from my back.

"The Maestro saw the tickets for the performance," said Yuri in tears, "He was afraid Mafuyu would change her mind, so he booked the tickets immediately."

The tickets which we gave her. Oh right, Ebichiri's taking a break starting from today.

Mafuyu, she..... In two hours time, she'll be taking off for the other side of the ocean.

It was only then when I felt a sharp pain, as though half of my body were forcefully slashed apart from me. I knew that the moment would come sooner or later, but it does not feel real at all. It's farewell.





"Naomi, g-get to the airport right now!"

Yuri pushed me hard against my chest.

"Young man, it'll take an hour and thirty-seven minutes to reach the airport." "It's only two o'clock right now!"

I looked towards Senpai and Chiaki in disbelief. What..... What are you two talking about?

"..... I won't..... be going."

A voice of feigned toughness.

"Naomi? Why are you still being stubborn at a time like this—"

"Our performance is about to start!"

"What..... What are you saying, you idiot!? It's way more important to see Mafuyu....."

"But this is live. There's no way I will abandon my band at a time like this."

"I'll do it!"

Yuri pulled himself away from my chest all of the sudden and looked at the three members of feketerigó.

"I'll play the bass. Hey, you should have heard it before, Naomi. I know how to play everything..... everything. And I play them better than Naomi does. S-So Naomi, you should....."





I had no idea where the strong emotions were surging up from within me. I grabbed Yuri by his collar and slammed him against the wall of the corridor. Even Tetsurou was stunned.

"Nao.....mi....."

Yuri arched his body in pain.

I did hear it before. Yuri could easily replicate the melody of my bass just by listening to it once. It's as easy as him rolling the oranges with the tip of his fingertips. But still.

"Don't you underestimate feketerigó."

A deep, murky voice.

"Yuri's bass may be a hundred times better than mine, but I am the only person who can control the effect unit. The only person who can harmonize with Senpai's melody from beneath is me as well."

Along with Chiaki's support, I am the only person who can make the heart beat. Also, the only person who can bring us up into the sky is Mafuyu. And only Mafuyu.

Mafuyu's..... the only person who can do it.

My hands and my fury lost their strength and dropped away. A hand grabbed me gently by my shoulders and pushed me aside. The person then carried the body of Yuri, who was about to slide to the floor.

It was Kagurazaka-senpai.





"..... S-Sorry, but, but, I..... Mafuyu and, Naomi, they....."

Yuri began sobbing in Senpai's arms. I stared at my own hands. What the heck have I just done? What's the point in venting my anger towards Yuri?

However, even if I had said everything in the heat of the moment..... Actually, that's what makes them totally true.

"Young man."

Senpai caressed Yuri gently on his hair and said softly.

"You won't regret this?"

I sank my fingernails deep into my palm. I had not fully restrained my unreasonable anger just yet. What's this? Why does this person have such an exaggerated evaluation of me all the time?

"Of course I will!" My voice was steaming. "I'll definitely regret it regardless of whether I go or not, but.....!"

The gazes from everyone were incredibly painful, so I threw my words towards my feet.

"This is Mafuyu's band, a place where she can return and play the guitar once more. Therefore, there's no way I'll forsake this place!"

"Mafuyu..... her guitar? W-What do you mean by that? Hey, Nao!"

Chiaki approached me and shook me hard by my shoulder. Ahhh, I said it. Mafuyu had planned to keep it a secret forever, but I said it. But of course. There's no need to keep it a secret, yeah?





Aren't we fellow comrades who are tied together by an existence named Mafuyu? Aren't we feketerigó, people who share the same blood and soar in the sky as one?

I told everyone everything. Including the reason why Mafuyu goes to the hospital, the reason why she quit school and chose to stay in the hospital for a long time.

Mafuyu's plans.

Chiaki grabbed me by my arms and sunk her fingers into my skin in anguish.

"..... That's just silly. Mafuyu and Nao are both silly. I can't understand you two at all!"

She rubbed her temple with her fist as she said that.

The footsteps above our heads were getting more chaotic as time went by, and the cheers were increasingly louder. I could hear the MCs rattling on and on, stirring up the excitement of the audience. Chiaki drew out the pair of drum sticks from the back of her belt and held it in her right hand. She then shot me a glance before making her way through the corridor. Towards the direction where the noises were rumbling down the stairs.

"Let's get going, young man."







With his hands pressed against the wall, Yuri was staring at me with his eyes filled with all of his pent-up emotions.

I said nothing. All I wished was for him to listen to our performance. I should be able to convey to him the things which could never be conveyed through the recorded rehearsal if he listened to the actual live performance.

Turning around, I began sprinting towards Chiaki and Senpai amidst the rumbling sounds.

The B stage's lights were extinguished, so we had to be careful not to be tripped by the wires as we began setting up our instruments and equipment. Tomo and Furukawa offered their help in setting up the equipment as well, since they were the previous group that performed on that stage.

On the A stage, the vocal group was swaying their bodies along to the funky melody, but their harmony was nevertheless solid.

The stands were ready. I strapped the bass onto my shoulder and knelt down beside the effect unit in an attempt to calm myself down.

There was a sudden kick on my ass, causing me to fall forward and into the legs of the microphone stand. As I crawled myself up and turned my body around, I realized I was being stared by a pair of sharp eyes located beneath a bandanna. It's Furukawa.

"So that lass ain't coming after all?"





"B-Because..... I said it before, didn't I? Mafuyu won't be playing the guitar anymore."

"Who gives a damn about that? I was looking forward to it."

He was hoping Mafuyu would come. Just as I thought, Furukawa was displeased with my performance during yesterday's rehearsal.

"That's right. I thought she'll show herself on the official performance, since there's two weeks for her to learn and memorize the correct methods to play the guitar. And then the shallow performance of your band will return back to normal."

It's impossible..... for such a miracle to exist.

"So it'll just be the same performance as yesterday? That's not even worth listening to."

I shifted my gaze away from Furukawa's body.

Just then, I crossed sight with Kagurazaka-senpai, who was adjusting the height of the microphone stand. From the bitter expression on her face, I guessed she must have heard my conversation with Furukawa.

The only thing the three of us could do was to modify mine and Senpai's parts to fill up the gaps left by Mafuyu. That's all. Nothing more than a quick fix.

"You guys were at your best during the auditions, yeah? I've no idea why you guys insist on performing on stage."

Furukawa disappeared behind the stage after leaving us those harsh words of his.





Even so, the only thing we could do is to perform.

Despite the fact that we can only hit 75%, even at our maximum capacity and capabilities.

The cheers swelled and exploded. The dance beats that were hitting against my organs came to a halt as the lights on the A stage turned blue. I could clearly see the performers in their ending pose.

The MCs began chatting in a clear tempo, though I am not quite sure what language they were speaking in. It sounded more like a rap. I could sort of make out the word 'feketerigó' buried between the sentences.

I shot a glance at Senpai, who was standing in front of Chiaki. The three of us exchanged gazes for a brief instant. As the hi-hat began playing the semiquavers, I took a firm grip on my bass and moved myself towards the microphone stand. Everything started with the clear tones from the chord strokes, then followed by the entanglement of the toms.

I began knocking my fingertips against the strings of the bass. Restlessness began to rise. Fractured syncopations.

Kagurazaka-senpai's powerful scream slit the dark, blue oceans apart, igniting the flames with a blinding light.

Before me, hundreds of men and women were shaking their hair about with bloodshot eyes, as though they were dancing in asphyxiation. The waves of bass played from my fingers were sending high-voltage pulses into their heart, vanquishing all the sluggishness in their body.





I squeezed the lowest part of the bass' neck and allowed the bass line to gnaw its way into the treble. Upon receiving instructions, the effect unit began to combine, analyse and broaden the input received from the chord strokes of Kagurazaka-senpai's guitar. The result was an explosive outburst of light from the electric organ and the phase-shifted strings instrument. The rain of light was sucked in the opposite direction into a black hole — the cloudy area just beneath Senpai's singing voice, the place which originally should have been where Mafuyu's guitar bursts apart.

There's no way we can fill that up. How can that be possible?

I came into the painful realization yet again as I plucked the strings of my bass, which felt more like my blood vessels instead.

Mafuyu's not here.

At this very moment, I wish you can be together with us beneath the skies of the burning rain. However, Mafuyu's nowhere to be found.

Is it because I was trying to carve the unbearably painful and depressing truth into my ears, my eyes and onto each and every inch of my skin? Is that the reason why I allowed the arrangement to be all mashed up and the effect unit to go crazy, all so that I could ram my sound into Senpai's singing voice?

It's just as Yuri and Chiaki had said. I am a hopeless idiot.

A large hole appeared in my heart. In a half-hearted response to that, I increased the tempo of my music. My blood was spewing wildly, and the wound was getting larger and larger.





However, the only thing I could do was to continue singing. There's no way Senpai could see me crying, and that applies to Chiaki as well. Of course, there was no way the audiences could either. However, should I stop singing for even a brief second, my voice will be seared by my tears, never to make a sound again.

Therefore, I continued singing and allowed the breeze from the ventilators to streak past my wet cheeks.

The sense of reality was stripped away from my limbs. Each and every one of the wildly dancing audience members were like the cells in my body. As the tired cells were removed, new cells grew in their place, lusting for blood as they soak up vitality.

I guess this is how god must have felt.

Even so, I have no need for this.

As of now, all I need to do was to tug at the invisible strings that were arranged orderly in the air, and I could drag out the one singing voice which I yearn from among the thousands of people. Even if it's the one that's all hoarse, whose lungs were shriveled up and the body reduced to dust.

But I needed none of that.

All I wanted was to see Mafuyu.

I wanted to see her. I wanted to see her so badly—

"— Young man!"





I lifted my head up and swatted away the darkness that was engulfing me. Before I realized it, I had fallen onto my knees, my hands gripping tightly onto the microphone stand.

What's going on here? The lights were splitting my face into two. Is our performance not over yet? I turned my head slightly. I could see Kagurazaka-senpai looking at me with a sorrowful expression, as well as her hand that was placed on my shoulder.

"Young man, can you still continue? Can you stand?"

When did I fall on my knees? We were done with the fifth song of our medley, a song where I was the lead vocals, and Senpai's guitar solo was the accompaniment to the fugue..... so why can I still hear the beats as well as the piano riffs? And there's the avalanche of footsteps and applause coming from beneath my feet?

Turning my head back, I could see Chiaki sitting between the well illuminated drum set, her hair swaying wildly as she powered the engine into rotation. I shivered.

The effect unit read the tempo of Chiaki's toms and converted it into a faint harmony of the piano and the xylophone.

"Young man, it's time for our encore! The A stage's not done with their preparation yet, so we'll be extending our performance. Get up on your feet!"

Encore? You want me to bleed even more? Are you trying to get me to puke the liquefied bones and organs within me? But..... But I'm in such great pains already. What else can I sing? Mafuyu's no longer around. Regardless of the song we can choose in our hearts,





all we'll be doing is to confirm the fact that she's no longer around us—

Just then, we found the answer — me from Senpai's eyes, and she from my lips.

Really?

Senpai asked me silently.

Can we really do it?

I'm not sure if we did nod our heads in agreement. We turned our heads back and looked towards Chiaki. I knocked at the body of my bass twice with three of my fingers. Chiaki blinked hard in response. Even with the loss of our right wing, we are still the bird with a single wing. We need no words to communicate with each other.

The right hand was raised up high. It grabbed onto the semiquavers that were busily filling up the air in the club and torn it away at one go.

The toms, piano and the glittering decorations that were scattered around the melody disappeared in an instant. The audiences, tired from their dances, were suddenly left alone in the snow. They looked upward towards the cloudy sky in confusion. And just then, a faint tingling sound — Chiaki's hi-hats came in with its 6/8 beats.

Senpai and I did not even lift our fingers. Neither did we sing.

But I heard it.

Senpai and Chiaki should have heard it as well. It's <[Happy Xmas](#)>.





I could hear the melody carved by Mafuyu with all her strength using her Stratocaster. That might have been nothing more than an illusion; or perhaps it's the memories of the past that were slumbering within the program of the effect unit, only to be awakened by the light bells of Chiaki only for this very night.

However, we were not the only ones who can hear that sound.

The singing voices from beneath my feet as well as in the air, and the singing of Mafuyu's Stratocaster to liven up the Christmas eve — both of them overlapped together to herald another melody. In came the singing voices of the children, praying for the end of wars.

I could actually hear it. The tired couples were humming along to the song which composed of only two verses as it reverberated in the night sky. They did not know Mafuyu's name. They should have never heard Mafuyu's guitar before.

We were not the only ones who heard it.

Mafuyu's here.

Mafuyu's really here.

As the first chorus was over, Senpai and I walked slowly towards the microphone. Chiaki's fill-ins were supporting Senpai's chord strokes as they soared high into the air. As for me, my bass was hitting hard in her shadow.

After the main chorus was done, Senpai began crooning into the mike. I had planned to join in as her harmony. But I could make no sound. My throat was burned by the acid-like tears. I could clearly hear Mafuyu's song right above the pulsations carved out by me,





nested between the chord strokes of Kagurazaka-senpai. The voice which I had long lost, never to get it back again.

No, can I get it back? What should I do?

Mafuyu has already began her journey while we are still singing on stage. None of us have exchanged words of confirmation to each other. Music is a flame which will emit its rays of light to wherever it wants, regardless of the distance. However, doing just that will only result in an imprint of a white silhouette in the eyes. That's how fragile and delicate feelings are if you can't convert them into words.

Therefore, we sing.

That's the reason why singing is the source of all music, regardless of the age or the nation we are in. Singing is the forerunner which strings everything together and burns it all apart.

In the end, under the guidance of Senpai's singing, thousands of voices lit up once more like burning flames. The song of prayer John Lennon had entrusted to the children. The war will end so long as you pray for it earnestly. But John was killed. Still, what remained were not just words, not just his vision, and not just his music.

When she was done with the harmony, Kagurazaka-senpai did the usual — she lifted the neck of her Les Paul above her head and began to strum her guitar solo wildly. She finished off the first phrase with a single breath before looking towards Mafuyu on her right..... and winked. She then turned her head and flashed me a smile.

Senpai showed me her smile.





Because Mafuyu's right there.

I played my bass to the hemiola tempo in response to Senpai's smile. I guess she knew that my cheeks were all wet, but that's okay. As we approached the end of our encores, all four members of feketerigó focused their eyes right in the middle. Turning our head backwards, our gaze clashed with Chiaki's eyes in between toms. I strummed the strings with all my might as I squeezed out all the air in my body, screaming my lungs out as I ran about the stage. When the lights extinguished in perfect timing to the end of the song, I collapsed onto the floor as the cheers from the audiences swept towards me like a whirlwind.





Chapter 16

Airport, Black Light

In the end. I had to depend on Tomo's shoulders just so that I could walk back to the preparation room. Chiaki and Senpai, despite being all wobbly, managed to make their way back with the assistance of the walls. That's really pathetic of me.

We flowed through the door into the room like a pot of melted soup. The staff and the other performers congratulated us on our performance, but I couldn't quite catch what they were saying. I looked at the clock in a hazy state of mind.

Three-thirty.

"..... I guess it's already too late."

Mumbled Chiaki. Her face was flushed and filled with sweat.

I grabbed onto my windbreaker and raincoat and stood up. Surprisingly, Kagurazaka-senpai already had her coat on and was preparing to leave the room.

"Oh my, you're coming along too?"

"..... Yeah."

I gripped hard onto the MD in my pocket. It recorded everything directly from the effect unit via a cable.





Though I knew everything was done in vain. There's no way we could make our way to the airport in just thirty minutes' time. However, there's no way I'll stay put and just wait.

"I'm different from young man though. I won't do silly and pointless things. But I am going."

"Senpai? Why are you accompanying that idiot—"

Chiaki ran towards Senpai, only to get her forehead prodded by Senpai instead.

"Because it might not be too late. You coming along as well, Comrade Aihara?"

It's still not too late? What should we do? I walked out of the room together with Senpai. Just as I was about to ask her what she meant by that—

"Naomi! Naomi! Hey!"

A small golden streak came rushing towards us from the entrance to the stairs. Yuri managed to brake just in time, just as he was about to crash into me. He bent his body and panted for a while before lifting his head and said,

"W-We might..... still have..... time! Head to the airport now!"

"W-Why?" Where did he run to?

"The flight's delayed? They're waiting to see how things go?"





Senpai interrupted us with her questions. I finally understood what was going on.

It's the snow. That might have delayed the flight. Why did I forget that possibility?

"From the announcements made, you may be able to make it in time. But should the snowing stop....."

"Hurry!"

Senpai began her sprint before Yuri was even done with his sentence. Chiaki overtook me in an instant since I was running slowly as my knees were trembling from fatigue. Then for some unknown reason, Yuri followed us as well. The four of us ran up the stairs and into the elevator.

"W-Wait, urm....." Yuri let out a brief pant before he continued, "The trains have halted their service, and the highways are currently in a huge jam!"

"W-What should we do then? We were finally given a ray of hope!"

Chiaki grimaced as she spat out her words and hammered her legs hard in frustration. As my burning body was gradually cooling down , a dark blue despair was taking its place from within. I fished out my phone to check on the traffic news. Just as Yuri had said, the trains to the airport were halted due to the snow. What about the cabs then? No wait, can we actually get one? Moreover, most of the roads were probably in a huge jam due to the heavy snow. Are there any alternative routes to the airport? Even if it means I have to walk—





The elevator stopped and we were thrown into the spacious lobby. I finally took back control of my muscles away from the chilling cold. I began running, taking no notice of what Yuri was saying behind me. It was still snowing beyond the entrance, though the snow was shielded away by the glass walls. The trees along the sidewalk were covered up by a thick layer of white. As for the cars on the roads that were covered up in snow and not moving an inch, they looked like sushi on conveyor belts.

I walked past the glass doors and made my way outside, only to be welcomed by the bone-chilling winds mixed with fine snow. Immediately afterwards, something came flying towards me from my left, so I caught it in reflex. The pain expanded outwards from the middle of my palms.

It's a full-face helmet.

I looked in disbelief at the roaring bike parked along the side of the road, as well as the scrubby-looking guy in overalls who was standing beside it.

"..... What, so it's Nao huh. I would have preferred having a female passenger instead."

Said Tetsurou nonchalantly as he got on the bike and put on his helmet. The sounds of footsteps were approaching me from behind. It's Senpai and the rest of the gang.

"Get your ass here, my silly son. Button up your coat, or else it'll be dangerous when you're riding pillion. And the gloves too. I have no intention of driving safely, so you better be prepared."

I was stunned on the spot. Chiaki gave me a hard slap on my back.





"Get going, stupid Nao!"

"I'll try to catch up with you guys. Should you make it in time, remember to say this to Comrade Ebisawa: you'll be cheating on her brazenly if she's not coming back."

"Naomi, b-be careful."

"No worries. If we are to get ourselves into an accident, we'll be reporting to the other world together, hand-in-hand as father and son. We won't be lonely."

"Don't say something as ominous as that!" I was that close to throwing my helmet in his direction.

"Oh— great, everything's okay if you're feeling well enough to retort me. Now get on!"

I wasn't even sure if I could convert all of my feelings into words, but they were about to turn into a ball of mess and be forced out of my mouth. Therefore, I suppressed those emotions of mine as I put on my helmet and got myself on the backseat. I then circled my arms around Tetsurou's surprisingly broad back. The next second, my body was pressed downwards. I was close to being thrown off the bike, so I applied more strength into my arms that were about to tear apart.

And then, all I could see was snow streaking past me.

The roads were still pretty jammed up even as we made our way past the city center. After taking a quick shortcut, Tetsurou did exactly just as he had said earlier and picked up speed without





hesitation. I was a little frightened when I saw a large amount of snow accumulating on the back tires.

When we stopped at the traffic light, Tetsurou said,

"Move your knees and flex your fingers about when we've stopped. It'll be incredibly stupid if you can't run once we reach the airport."

I moved them as he had instructed, and they gave a groan in response. I couldn't help but wonder; would my arms fall off my shoulders due to frostbite without me even noticing? I never thought that taking a pillion ride in the snow would be this much of a hell.

We got ourselves on the highway as the houses around us were decreasing in number. The LED signboards confirmed the fact that no roads were closed off. It had stopped snowing.

"It's great that the snow has stopped, but the plane may be flying anytime soon."

Tetsurou mumbled as we shot past the interchange. I didn't bother checking the time despite travelling past several petrol kiosks and stations. It's way past the scheduled flight, so the only thing I could do was to hug Tetsurou tightly on his back and pray.

As we moved into the interchange, I could see lines of cars before me. The jam was slowly letting up as Tetsurou weaved the bike through cars without hesitation. When we made our way past the first toll, the snow that was falling from the sky was much lesser than the amount of snow stirred up from the roads. But surprisingly, the temperature was dropping. It felt like my skin was getting sliced apart by a rusty blade. However, the areas beneath my elbows and my knees were completely numb and devoid of





feelings. Tetsurou's suggestions did nothing at all. But I was in no position to complain though. Tetsurou's pain should be a hundred times greater than mine.

I suddenly thought of something while being exposed to the bone-chilling winds and the snow.

"Hey, Tetsurou!"

I knew it was dangerous, but I shouted anyway.

"What? Don't shout into my ears! You're too loud!"

"W-Why did you ride your bike here?"

To send Yuri here, of course. That much I know. But.

I saw something when I was checking on the traffic news with my cellphone. The train from my house to the mall was running normally.

Meaning, Tetsurou had planned to send me to the airport right from the very beginning?

"Listen to me, Nao!"

I could hardly hear Tetsurou's yells due to the helmet as well as the wind blowing against his voice.

"I don't think you can hear me that clearly, but I'm gonna say something really great right now. Probably the number one thing that a father shouldn't say to his son! Don't become like me!"





That 'great' sentence was the only line which I heard in full clarity. I pressed my helmet against Tetsurou's back and increased the strength in my arms.

"You see! In the end, I wasn't able to hold onto the woman I loved. You've inherited that useless personality of yours from me, so sorry for that! There's nothing you can do since you can't choose your parents! But you still have time! I'll definitely make it in time!"

Thanks to the helmet, I could not wipe my tears away, nor could I allow the winds to blow them away.

The soundproof walls which covered up the road like a tube disappeared all of the sudden. Appearing on the other side of the wall was a breathtaking, pure white building. A roaring sound zoomed past my head. As the sky was obscured by the snow, I could only make out the outline of the jet.

It's the airport.

My vision was blocked off by the soundproof walls yet again. I could only see the control tower and the towering figure of the airport terminal. The snow had stopped. The airplanes are starting to take off!

The blue sign streaked past the top of my head. Tetsurou had changed lanes to enter a down-slope which leads to the entrance. I could hear another roar of the airplanes as we passed the toll booth. Has her flight taken off? Calm down, I'll have to confirm it first.

Tetsurou stopped the bike to the south of the airport terminal where the cars were all jammed up and dropped me off. As I rolled





off the backseat, I removed the gloves from my hands with my mouth and fished out my cellphone. Yuri mailed me a simple message with the details of the flight which Mafuyu will be taking as well as the current situation. It's still delayed as they were ploughing the snow off the runway. There's still time.

"Thanks, Tetsurou!"

I began to run. The passengers and their luggage, who were forced to remain in the airport due to the delays, were jamming up the entrance to the terminal. The warm air from the indoors made my skin itch. It felt like I was hobbling on my knees, but I could not feel any pain. Announcements like "We're very sorry for the delays" were played repeatedly. At the same time, they were announcing details like how long a certain flight will be delayed, and when it will be taking off. I could feel my spine freezing gradually. Where's the international flights? The customs and checkpoints were located on the third floor. There's no way I could get in if Mafuyu were already done with checking in her luggage. I squeezed into the elevator filled with luggage and travellers in thick winter clothing and made my way up the narrow shaft. The announcer made his announcement just then. "Passengers of flight number 6331 of the Continental Airlines heading for Los Angeles, please board your flight now." I took out my cellphone with my trembling hands to check once more. It's the flight Mafuyu will be taking. I almost collapsed in desperation when I saw the ocean of passengers on the third floor. The crowd had squeezed up each and every check-in counter at the customs, and that's incomparable to the swarm of people at the secondary security checks. I was in a daze. I began to push the crowd aside and made my way forward. How the hell am I supposed to find Mafuyu in this crowd? What if she's on the airplane already?





I squeezed past the crowd and made my way to the front of the counters. Despite the fact that the travellers and staff around me were looking at me; a kid with no luggage and only a raincoat on his body, in suspicion, I was unaware of their gazes.

My eyes were fixed onto the maroon-coloured long hair which had just walked past the security gate. She was about to make her way towards the boarding gate.

"— Mafuyu!"

A hoarse, dry sound echoed through the hall.

Mafuyu turned around, her sapphire eyes opened wide in surprise. For a brief moment, I could see all sorts of emotion flashing past the surface of the blue ocean.

"Mafuyu—!"

I propped my body out of the gate and yelled. I then finally notice Ebichiri, who was standing next to the luggage-pulling Mafuyu. Upon seeing my face, Ebichiri's angry expressions were bare for all to see.

He grabbed onto the hands of his dumbfounded daughter and tried to guide her towards the boarding gate. However, Mafuyu's legs were not moving. Her mouth remained opened as she tried to speak.

It was like we were tying each other down with our eyes. Ebichiri's expressions changed after an announcement was made. He tried to forcibly pull his daughter away.

"Naomi?"





Said Mafuyu with a stiff voice.

"W-Why..... are you here?"

Can't I be here? My vision was close to blacking out.

"You idiot, why..... can't you be here e-earlier....."

I could see a few uniformed staff running towards me through the corner of my eyes. Ebichiri was pulling Mafuyu away from the barrier by her arm. She's leaving. It took me so much effort to finally see her. I finally made it in time, but Mafuyu's about to leave and there's nothing I can do but to watch.

"Mafuyu!"

I pulled out the MD from my pocket and began my move. There was a huge commotion among the crowds. Getting restrained by the airport staff; snow that was left on my arm; the distance between Mafuyu and me—

In an attempt to slice all of that apart, I threw it out.

A black light flew past the security gate and the barriers that were separating us, and landed straight into Mafuyu's chest.

I could hear the sound of the world splitting into two.

Mafuyu's hands were reaching out in my direction — she had lost her right hand, got it back for a brief moment, only to lose it once more. The sound of her catching the ray of light with that irreplaceable hand of hers.





The staff at the security gates ran towards Mafuyu. As for me, I was surrounded by security, who had grabbed me by my wildly thrashing hands. I wanted to push the crowds aside so that I can see Mafuyu. At the very least, I wanted to say something to her. The security guards were roaring furiously into my ears. I twisted my body, flung my shoulders about and rammed my body into the wall of people to break myself out.

Ebichiri and the rest of the airport staff protected Mafuyu by blocking off my vision of her. The beige coat was about to hide the long maroon hair away.

"I'll be waiting for you!"

I squeezed out my voice.

"I'll find you if you do not come back! I'll definitely find you!"

The insane me was pinned onto the ground by several pairs of arms. My world was covered up by white linoleum. I was hit hard on the back of my neck by the security, who were shouting boorishly.

At long last came the announcement of the flight taking off. Countless number of footsteps — footsteps that were both approaching and leaving me gradually — dealt the final blow to my consciousness.

I was brought to a room and made to sit on a foldable chair. I listened to the rumbling roars. Which one of these pairs of wings was carrying Mafuyu? — I thought to myself.





In the end, I only managed to convey my music to her. No, I might even have failed in regards to that. Perhaps it was taken away by airport security. Or perhaps Ebichiri had confiscated it already. I couldn't even remember my answers to the harsh questioning of the airport staff.

Only Mafuyu.

The only thing that was imprinted in my memory. The only thing which I last saw was the back of Mafuyu.





Chapter 17

Graduation Ceremony

As I opened the door leading to the roof, the shy noon rays of March slightly blinded me.

Normally, you'll hear things like trumpets or trombones from the orchestra, the chattering of girls as they opened their bentos in the courtyard, or the guys going for the ball in the basketball court. Typically speaking, it should be pretty lively. But today, the school was shrouded in solemn silence. The only things I could hear were the school song and the piano accompaniment coming from the sports hall.

I lay onto the rough concrete floor and looked downwards, and I immediately saw a uniformed figure sitting on the fence. Her two braids were swaying about in the spring breeze, while a few strands of hair were resting on the black guitar on her thighs. She had her eyes closed — is she listening to the school song?

Wait, she's closing her eyes?

I rushed forward in a hurry.

"That's dangerous, Senpai! And you still have the guitar with you—"

Kagurazaka-senpai opened her eyes a little in my direction and smiled.





"For the past three years, I've spent way more time sitting here with my Les Paul than I did on the chair in my classroom. So you don't have to worry."

No, even if you say that, it's really easy to fall off when you have your eyes closed. What the hell are you thinking?

Senpai probably found the uneasy expression on my face really amusing, so she jumped off the fence and patted me on the shoulder.

"I get it, we need our bodies for our performance. I won't do anything rash. I mean, tomorrow's they're holding the graduation ceremony just for me. I want to go against all odds and make it as grand as possible."

"Urm, why don't you take part in the actual graduation ceremony instead?"

I pointed in the direction of the sports hall.

"You do know it's a school tradition to have the year-three student with the best overall grades in the mock exams to be the representative for the students?"

"Oh, is that so?" I had no idea.

"But the teachers are unwilling to let a student who has barely passed the attendance requirements to be the representative, and I have no intention of reading a script checked by the teachers. We share the same interests, so I skipped the ceremony and came to the roof instead. It's the world of the adults. As of now, the certain someone who's acting as my replacement is probably reading some





really boring stuff along the lines of 'a future full of hope' and so on."

Chiaki and I were worried about whether Senpai could graduate successfully. However, that woman achieved her required grades easily and had already decided to enroll herself in the National University. It's not like I didn't know how good her brains are, but I never expected her grades to be that stellar.

"Senpai will definitely say something explosive if you gave the graduation speech."

"If you want, I can make one during tomorrow's live performance."

Smiled Senpai as she gently caressed her Les Paul. We'll be holding a graduation concert at <Bright> tomorrow, with Senpai as the star.

"Oh right. Why do you know I'm here, young man?"

"Because we went there looking for you. I was waiting outside while Chiaki sneaked a peek at the sports hall. She told me you were not in."

Due to our school's large population, the only non-graduates who could participate in the ceremony were a small handful of students involved in students council work.

"Ah, there you are! I've finally found you!"

I was shocked by the sudden yell. Turning my head around, I saw Chiaki next to the roof's door running in our direction.

"Nao got the better of me again. This sucks."





Chiaki stared fiercely at me as she hugged onto Kagurazaka-senpai's arm.

"Did you two split up to search for me?"

"I thought Senpai was in the practice room. Speaking of which, why did you skip the graduation ceremony?"

"We no longer live in a world where we have to graduate from the control of others. Did you want me to take part in the ceremony?"

"But I was planning to catch you as you walked out of the sports hall and take the second button off you."

That's for the guys uniform, yeah? However, Senpai gave a giggle and leaned against the fence as she removed her Les Paul off her shoulder.

"It just so happens that there's four buttons on my blazer. This is for Comrade Aihara. This is what you'll refer to as the second button."

She tore off the button on the bottom left and passed it to Chiaki. A blissful expression appeared on Chiaki's face.

"And this is for young man."

She gave me the decorative button that was on the bottom right.

"And this is mine."

She took off the top left button and put it into her pocket.





She then tore off the last button and gave it a kiss. Senpai turned around to face me.

"..... Where is she now? Europe?"

I was taken by surprise, but I knew immediately what Senpai was talking about.

"She should be doing a tour in Russia, though that's what I've read from the magazines."

"Oh, Russia huh?"

Senpai began walking towards the fence on the opposite side. Chiaki and I followed in her footsteps, as if we were attracted by some sort of unknown energy. Beneath our eyes, the scenery of the school was bare for us to see. The white lines framing the ground were actually the sakura blossoms that were planted in the school, though they were blossoming at only about 30%.

Kagurazaka-senpai swung her tightly clenched fists with all her might and threw the button into the air. Chiaki and I did not follow the trajectory of the button's flight. We just stared at the broad, blue sky.

It probably flew to the other side of the ocean.

"There's no longer any need for this."

Senpai removed the blazer which was devoid of its buttons. The dark blue feather that was thrown to the other side of the fence rode on the winds and soared downwards, towards the sakura colours far away from us.





Why is this so? — I thought to myself.

It's not an eternal farewell. We'll be seeing each other tomorrow on the same stage, but my tears would not stop.

Mafuyu did not return even after a year had passed.

My first reunion with her was through the cover story of a music magazine. Somewhere around summer last year, I think. It talked about Mafuyu's successful rehabilitation as well as her desire to make a comeback onto the music scene.

Her first comeback album was a three CD album, something that is pretty uncommon. It's the full collection of Beethoven's piano concertos. Ebichiri's the conductor, while the Boston Orchestra's the accompaniment. The father and daughter pairing became quite a topic. It was a huge success. However, it seems like the original plan where she performs the violin sonata together with Yuri was canned. As a result, Kagurazaka-senpai was incredibly envious of the sample tape which I had in my possession, and even begged me to let her to copy it. However, I always ended up rejecting her wishes, because I do not want anyone else to hear it.

Perhaps because this is my treasure.

Just as what she had said before, Mafuyu began to hold concerts as well. It started off with her performing in major cities in America along with Ebichiri, but it soon grew to her performing solo all over Europe. She's appearing more frequently on television as well. Not just that, it looks like even the non-music related magazines are hot on her heels as well. I could never imagine her to be the same girl whom we used to perform together on stage and study





together with. The same girl who got angry easily, pissed others off, made people cry and even revealed her crying face to others.

However, I knew from her piano, be it from the CDs or the live telecast on the fourth channel, that Mafuyu still exists. In a country on the other side of the ocean and out of my reach; located somewhere in a magnificent and icy world of light.

Yuri either e-mails or calls me all the time. There are occasions where he'll send me a letter while he's on a tour.

"I saw Mafuyu when Ebichiri invited me to Boston. Are you jealous?"

And he'll even make an international call just so he can tell me stuff like that.

"..... Is she doing okay?"

"I'm asking if you're jealous."

Why are you angry? Though I am indeed jealous.

"That's just the way Naomi is. That's the reason why Mafuyu refuses to speak whenever I want to bring Naomi up in our conversation."

"Urm..... I see....."

I heaved a sigh. It's quite a huge blow to hear that coming from someone who sees her frequently.

"Why don't you see her?"





"No, well, you see..... she's not in Japan."

I knew very well it was nothing more than an excuse, and Yuri probably did as well. If I want to, all I need to do is to get Tetsurou to contact Ebichiri, or ask Yuri for his assistance. A flight is all I need, even if she's in America, France or Germany. However, I became scared whenever I think that she might be unwilling to see me.

Mafuyu may still be mad at me. Because I had done something really horrible to her.

"Mafuyu might hate me right now. She probably doesn't want to speak to me."

My thoughts were overshadowed by Yuri's tearful voice.

"..... Nah, I don't think that's the case."

"Maybe she doesn't want to see me anymore. Naomi will have to take responsibility if that's the case, alright?"

What responsibility?

Yuri will be coming to Japan in May. How about a gathering at the studio or the live house since Senpai misses him a lot? And with that, we ended the call.

As I disconnected the call, I suppressed the slightly painful warmth that was flowing out from the inside of my eyes.

She's probably too busy with her recordings and concerts — I consoled myself. That was the habit I developed ever since last winter, when she had stayed in America for a full year. It happens





every time I saw her on television or the magazines, or when someone mentions her all of the sudden.

However, as the pain flowed away from the inside of my head, all that was left within were the smiles of Mafuyu; her tearful face; her immature way of speaking; her angry voice; her wet whispers.

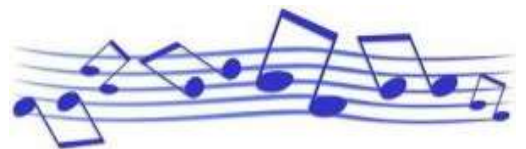
Feketerigó continued its activities even in the absence of Mafuyu. The biggest change however, is that Senpai has begun accepting guest performers into our band.

"Because we're learning how to fly with our broken wings."

And so for the graduation concert, the cramped stage of <Bright>, where a maximum of eight people can stand together at any given time, was filled up almost entirely by the guitarists. I had no idea what we were playing halfway into the performance. Chiaki was laughing like crazy, making quite a few mistakes during our performance.

However, the main event was the celebration that happened after the performance. We were on the second floor of the Chinese restaurant we patronized. Aside from the members of the band, there's Hiroshi, Furukawa and the rest of the members of Melancholy Chameleon, Tomo and his DJ buddies, staff of <Bright>, the manager of the shop which Senpai works at..... All sorts of people were there, drinking crazily.

"Kyouko, we'll be celebrating your graduation with thirty shots. Prepare yourself and your glass!"





Said Hiroshi as he walked right up to Senpai with a bottle of wine in his hand, and the rest of the guys queued up behind him. Hey, don't agree to the toast! But I wasn't even given the opportunity to stop her. Pour, drink, pour, drink. That went on as the queue began to shorten. It's like she's doing a drinking duel with the guys or something.

"There's still a long way to go."

Even after drinking all the shots given to her, Senpai was still sober as she placed her glass onto the table. And in response to her heroic performance, the guys had actually planned to go for a second round, but that was stopped in time.

"Still, why do you wanna study in a university, Kyouko? Didn't I say I'll recommend you to a record company? You should get your career on track asap."

The red-faced Hiroshi latched himself onto her.

"Those related to Hiroshi are probably around the same level as you, so please allow me to decline your offer. I do value my future, you know?"

"Hey, Taisei, you hear that? She just said something really rude."

"But that's the truth," Furukawa was a little taken aback when the conversation was thrown to him all of the sudden. "I think it's better for her to go indie."

Still, I never expected Senpai to continue her studies. And I wanted to know why.

"Hmm? Why? What else other than for knowledge?"





Senpai answered plainly as she poured a cup of shōchū.

"I'm a revolutionary. I'll lose my right to be one if I lack the knowledge."

"I never expected Senpai to have thought about things so seriously," Chiaki, who was sitting close to Senpai, was genuinely surprised. "I thought Senpai's main reason is to chase after the girls."

"That's one of the reasons as well. It seems like I've recently developed a taste for girls who're older than me. There'll probably be lots of rich ladies there. I'm really looking forward to it."

"Senpai's an idiot!"

Chiaki pulled Senpai by her ear. Sheesh, this girl never changes.

"But don't you worry, young man."

She leaned herself onto my arm.

"I chose a women's university so that you'll not feel uneasy."

I almost spat out the oolong tea in my mouth.

"— W-W-What do you mean by that?"

"Well, should she not return even after I've graduated..... That means I'll win by default, and you can finally lay your hands on me, yeah?"

No no no no.





I finally escaped away from that place with just enough time to make it for the final train. Chaiki followed along as well (we still had our graduation ceremony tomorrow). I was totally knocked out by the heat from the drinking party, so I used the bass as a replacement crutch and sat down on one of the chairs of the train station. I slumped my body weakly over my knees. "Are you okay? Do you need some water?" asked Chiaki worriedly. I guess no one can figure out who's drunk just from that scene alone.

It was around twelve midnight when the train reached the station that's closest to our homes. The feelings from the drinking party had subsided, and my face's no longer burning anymore. As I stepped off the train, I gripped hard at the sleeves of my coat due to the cold. There were no passengers left when Chiaki stepped off the train. The empty train rumbled away along the dark railway.

The two of us walked side by side. We share the same path for most of the route.

"Well, to be honest," Chiaki spoke suddenly as we crossed the zebra crossing, "I was actually hoping Senpai had to repeat another year."

That's brutally honest of you. But why are you talking about this all of the sudden?

"Her university's in Tokyo, right? It'll be quite difficult for us to meet her in the future, and I'm not even sure if we'll continue with the band."

"How about you aim for Senpai's university?"





Didn't you do the same for high school as well?

"There's no way I can get into that university with a brain like mine!" I was hit by her. I originally thought it was just a joke, but I noticed a shimmer at the corner of her eyes when she was staring at me. I felt a brief pain in my heart.

"It's getting lonelier and lonelier."

Don't you worry. There's no way human beings will disappear as easily as that.

Even if you're separated, you won't be lonely so long as you know you'll see each other again.

Even if you can't meet, you won't be depressed so long as you don't forget one another.

A few pointless words of consolations appeared in my mind. But I had no intention of saying any of them to her. Because they are all lies. I knew that very well.

Don't worry, I won't disappear.

That's the worst thing I could have said. I had no right to say that to Chiaki.

We walked silently past several streetlights. As we turned past the family restaurant which remained open in the middle of the night, the shadows of the housing complex drifted to our left. Walking down the slopes, the transmission towers came into sight. We're about to reach Chiaki's house.





"..... We'll still be doing our morning practice even though it's the graduation ceremony tomorrow, won't we?"

In the end, that was the only thing I could think of.

Chiaki stopped in her tracks and looked at me irritably.

"Hey, we're the rhythm section. As long as we're perfect with our practices, we'll do fine even if there's someone joining us all of the sudden."

Even if there's someone returning back to our music all of the sudden.

No problems will exist as long as the rhythm section is there to maintain the pace.

We can get feketerigó to soar at any give instance.

Chiaki then began hitting my arm all of the sudden, giving me quite a few punches in silence. Hey, what are you doing? It hurts. I moved my arm away, and just as I was about to look at her, her palm pushed my face away in the opposite direction.

"..... What?"

"Nothing."

"No, but....."

"I said nothing, so there's nothing! Sheesh, why is Nao always so irritatingly sensitive..... at a stupid..... time like this?"





This time round, it's my shoulders that had suffered from a few chops. I was about to say something, but Chiaki delivered a drop sweep and ran away.

"See ya, stupid Nao! Till tomorrow!"

Her tea-coloured hair was swaying about beneath the streetlights before disappearing into a corner. I was stunned on the spot for a brief moment. I then picked my bass up and resumed my journey.

I stopped in the middle of the overhead bridge. Burning emotions began rising up slowly within me as I directed my gaze along the broad roads and into a place that's further away than the intersection point of the street lights. Somehow, everything that I was seeing seemed so cute. The white lines on the road created by the speeding cars; the gradually leaving tail-lights of the cabs and the trucks; the night breeze infused with the faint scent of flowers; or perhaps Senpai's singing voice that had remained in my ears.

Everything will flow past you and disappear without a trace someday.

Tetsurou wasn't around when I reached home. Scattered messily on the table were several files and CDs. Looks like he went out while he was halfway into his work. He's probably having a coffee at the family restaurant or something. This may sound unbelievable, but Tetsurou can't even make himself a cup of instant coffee if I'm not around.

I leaned the bass against the wall and began organizing the DVDs and magazines scattered on the floor. I wasn't around for only a





day, and this is what happened. As I was stacking the materials neatly onto the desk, I noticed it.

Located at the top of the pile of CDs. The cover was taken from her right. A very simple picture of her looking down at the keyboard with her lowered eyes. Whenever she's performing, she'll always clip her maroon hair up like this and reveal that unbearably slender and pale nape of hers.

It's the latest album from Ebisawa Mafuyu. She has matured quite a bit — I thought. Is she still the Mafuyu I knew? I lifted the CD up slowly.

Ever since she had made her comeback, Mafuyu has released three albums in quick succession at an incredible pace. The reason I didn't buy them was because of the pain I'll feel just from looking at the covers and listening to her performances. But thanks to the nature of Tetsurou's job, we'll receive the CDs from the company as gifts even if I didn't purchase them.

The fourth album since her comeback. Finally, it's Bach. The complete collection of the French Suites. I wanted to listen to it so badly, despite knowing the fact that I'll definitely cry from this.

I sat on the sofa and opened up the case. Something fell out of the little booklet just as I was about to take out the explanatory notes. Picking it up, I realized it was a flyer detailing the schedule of Ebisawa Mafuyu's concert.

The flyer was filled with the names of the venues where she'll be performing at and the words [SOLD OUT], all the way from January to June. She wasn't scheduled to play in Japan. So I heaved a sigh and was about to place the flyer back into the case.





But then, I noticed something.

There's a particularly strange line in the flyer. The performance on the fourth of April.

It's the only performance that's not stamped with the words [SOLD OUT]. Instead, it was declared as [PRIVATE]. What's the meaning of this? The place's at Paris. The venue's name is in French, so I did not understand it. [PRIVATE]?

The location is pretty weird as well. There's no other performances scheduled in France after that. Just Paris.

Fourth of April.

I gripped onto the flyer tightly and rechecked the name of the venue again. I then dashed into the study on the second floor and confirmed it with a French-Japanese dictionary. It's "Thieves' Market". She'll be performing in a thieves' market in Paris?

Just then, all of my memories fell like a burst of sparks and were strung up together.

I pulled out the movable shelf where the science fiction novels were randomly placed in. Cordwainer Smith's famous for only a single title of his. I read through the novel once more. Found it.

I closed the book and held my breath as I looked up into the ceiling which was filled with spider webs.

Is this Mafuyu's message for me? Really? Is she requesting her company to put it in? But what if I missed it?





Why must she do something like this? Wouldn't it be easier to just say it directly—

The novel slipped off my hands.

Am I not doing the same thing as well? Dishonest with my feelings, and dragging things out day by day. Despite the fact that I wanted to see her. Even though I was dying to see her. We were located in different parts of the world, but all I did was to stand before the ocean which separates us both.

Even though I had said I'll find her.

I promised I'll find her regardless of where she may be, didn't I?

I picked up the book to slip the flyer between the pages where the answer was revealed before closing it up.

The scenery which appeared in my eyes consisted of the sounds of the waves, the whispers of the sea birds and the scent of the wet soil. It overlapped with the calls of a certain someone. Let's go. I'll know once I'm there.

It's a magical place, so it can probably hear my heartfelt desires.





Chapter 18

The Department Store at the Ends of the World

Climbing up the slope between the fields, the scent of grass was getting stronger and stronger. Rays from the sun seeped into the ground. Sounds of the waves were coming from a place far behind me.

The path became slightly flatter as I walked into the forest. The comfortable shadows coming from the tree tops were gently filtering out the sun for me. Thank goodness it's sunny — I thought to myself. It was a rainy day the last time I came here, and pitch black to boot. I came close to tripping on the tree roots on so many occasions back then.

The trucks had rolled out a path in the forest. Plants at the bottom of the trees were blooming. Two cycles of seasons have passed since the last time I came here.

Unease was slowly creeping into me. Is it still there? Does the magical valley still accept visits from a human being?

Stopping in my tracks, I leaned against a tree and took out a torn and tattered novel from the back pocket of my jeans. It sports the signature blue spine of the Hayakawa SF books. A sheep stood in the middle of the wilderness amid the sandstorm.

<[Norstrilia](#)>.





It's a story about a youth who obtained all the wealth in the universe. Not understanding what he truly desires, he went to Earth to seek an answer. Upon arriving on Earth, he met a beautiful cat and travelled to a fake underground city. Past the corner of the fake Paris thieves' market, stands the store of Catmaster. An extremely old store, with the ability to detect the true desires of its visitors. And the shop's named as — <The Department Store of Hearts' Desires>.

I rechecked the flyer that was clipped in the book. Everything fits. Should this be a message which Mafuyu left for me, and if that magic still exists.....

I stuffed the book back into my pocket and resumed walking. The soil felt hard beneath my feet. The air's moist, and with the roars of the ocean as well as the rustling of the branches, it sounded just like a drizzle outside a window. A bird spread its wings against the branches and then flew away, its cries streaking past my head. I'm praying with every step of mine.

The trees began to turn sparse. A murky mist was mixed into the backdrop of the forest. I picked up my pace, kicking up the accumulated leaves on the ground as I began to run. I couldn't hear any music. As I left the forest, my eyes and face were illuminated by the rays of the sun. Lying on the plateau in the middle of the broad valley was a mountain created by an unbelievable amount of trash. Derelict cars without their wheels and doors; rusty bicycles; fridges that were covered up with decomposing leaves; wardrobes whose colours have changed — everything was stacked up in a dangerous equilibrium, accumulating gradually and slowing down time.

The roars of the ocean; the chirps of the birds; the cries of the insects — I heard none of them, not even the howls of the wind. I





was standing at the entrance to the valley. The world ends here. I can't proceed any further.

I approached the dune slowly, careful not to make any sound. To make my way up the mountain of junk, I climbed onto the hood of a car, grabbed a buried prefab roofing and stepped on a heavily twisted road sign. The smell of rust, the smell of stale water and the smell of the accumulated years.

I made it to what looks like the crater of a volcano. A steep slope extended downwards from my feet to the depression in the middle of the mountain. I knelt on a twisted cabinet and scanned the lowland. A pang of dizziness hits me. I almost collapsed just like that.

There's no one around. The clear sunlight was drying up what was remaining of my hopes and dreams. I'm the only one here. Also—

The piano's not around.

The piano which tightly bound Mafuyu and me together was nowhere to be seen.

Even so, I placed my weak and trembling legs onto the metal rack below and began my slow descent. When I reached the borders of the lowland, I saw a black shimmer between an old vending machine and a public phone. I scrambled my way there, tripping myself on quite a few occasions and nearly fell.

The piano was buried heavily by all sorts of large trash. I could only catch a glimpse at a part of its keyboard, just like an iceberg. Pushing away the wooden shelf to get a better view inside, the strings of the piano had almost completely snapped. Its legs were broken as well.





Two seasonal cycles had passed. The abandoned objects will be destroyed to the point where they are no longer salvageable. That's of no surprise.

I squatted down on the pitted galvanized plate. Took out my cellphone to check the time. It's way past two; the time of the performance that was written on the flyer.

Why am I so stupid? That was no message for me. It may just so happen that there's really a concert hall which is named as "Thieves' Market" in Paris. I've lost something which I can't bear to lose, but I lack the courage to get it back — what a pathetic person I am, travelling on the trains for hours in order to reach the ends of the world, only to confirm the fact that she won't be returning to me. It was probably just a coincidence. Sunlight was gently shining onto the back of my ears. Tears could not flow out of my eyes as the world grinds to a halt.

I gently caressed the edge of the piano, which looked like it was melting into the ground. Having absorbed the rays of the sun, it was warm. That piano belonged to Mafuyu's mother. The piano which helped me locate the fragments of myself as well as my heartfelt desire.

However, it's broken now, unable to play any music ever again. The only things left were the remnants of the distant past reverberating fuzzily in my ears.

I want to see Mafuyu so badly. My throat was seared by my rising emotions.

Then shouldn't I just go and see her?





Let's go.

Let's fly to the country located on the other side of the ocean.

And this time round, I must say it properly to her.

I stood up and shook away the sounds of the piano in my memories that were echoing in my illusion. As I turned myself away—

I saw a pure white silhouette on the peak of the mountain of trash.

Slowly, the magic which was shrouding the valley disappeared. The pure white dress and the maroon hair were dancing to a gust of wind that was passing through the mountains.

I couldn't make any sound. This is not an illusion. The magic had already disappeared. But Mafuyu's right there before me, in reality, standing at a place I can reach with my outstretched hand.

Mafuyu's here.

I wanted to call out her name, but all I could muster was a hoarse sound instead. I could see her sapphire eyes widening. I leapt past over the muddy scooter and dashed towards her as I trampled over cardboard beer boxes and plastic bottles. I got onto the slope and climbed up with all my might, impervious to the possible danger that a landslide may occur.

"— Mafuyu!"

My voice finally rang this time. It's Mafuyu. It's indeed her! She came. We can finally meet. We can finally see each other!





"Nao.....mi."

The dumbfounded Mafuyu gave a faint murmur. She snapped herself back to reality and knelt herself down. Stretching out her sandalled feet timidly, she jumped onto a children's desk a short distance below her. She then turned towards me. She's planning to make her way down.

"No, w-wait, it's dangerous—"

Just as I was hesitating with my words, the drawer that Mafuyu was holding onto tilted unstably.

"—Kya!"

The surface of the trash slope began to crumble. The fridge on my feet wobbled, causing me to fall forward as well. With my legs positioned sturdily and my arms stretched out with all my might, I managed to catch the white feather that was fluttering down – I pulled Mafuyu's body towards me.

I crashed my back into what was probably the boot of an SUV, and coupled that with the weight of Mafuyu, it felt like all the air in my body was squeezed out of my nose and my ears. My back and the back of my head were assaulted by the incoming pain. My neck muscles twitched as the bone-rumbling sounds of the caving junk continued. That was dangerous.....

"— S-Sorry!"

Mafuyu sat herself up on my stomach amid the settling dust.

"U-Urm, I was shocked, so....."





"Nah, it's okay." Though I would have been dead for sure if there were anything sharp behind me. I was unable to move, but it wasn't due to the pain — rather, it's due to the sweet and bitter emotions that were mixed up in me. I continued staring at Mafuyu in a lying position. Her face framed by her hair, amber due to the rays of the spring sun. She might look mature on the cover of the CD, but that's totally not the case here. Those slightly teary sapphire-blue eyes belonged to the girl whom I know very well — the girl who gets angry easily and loves to cry.

I thought I'll never get to see her again. The words jammed up in my throat, as well as the boiling emotions that were surging up in me, were causing my lips to tremble.

"..... I never expected you..... to be here."

That was the only thing I could say. Mafuyu's face gradually turned red.

"W-Why?" She placed her fists onto my chest and pulled her face close to mine. "The fact that you're here means you saw it, right? My scheduled performances. That's why....."

"Eh? Ah, m-mmm."

All I needed to do was to believe.

"But it says two o'clock on the flyer. There was no one around when I came here, so....."

Mafuyu was blushing right down to her ears.

"T-T-Tha..... That's..... two o'clock in France's time zone."





Mafuyu made a painful attempt to come up with an excuse. France's time zone..... so that's six in the morning?

"Ah, urm—"

"..... Were you lost again?"

"I wasn't lost!"

She hammered at my chest. Oh well, whatever. She's just twenty to thirty minutes late.

I'm late for a full two years. But Mafuyu still came.

"I-I too....." stammered Mafuyu, her eyes in tears, "wanted to call you or e-mail you so many times. But, I-I wasn't sure if you..... so....."

I felt an insurmountable pain in my chest where Mafuyu was pressing her hands on.

"Therefore, had you not noticed it, I was planning..... to forget you. It's hard for me to have a break, and I wasn't sure when I could come back to Japan, so I begged the publicity department to tweak the flyer a little. B-But what if you didn't see it? What if you didn't notice it? What should I do? I've been thinking..... t-there's no need to do stuff like that, all I need is to give you a call, but, because..... you've never tried to contact me..... I was scared, I was so scared, but even then, if it's here, if it's this place....."

Mafuyu's voice was about to get swallowed up by her tears. I rested my hand gently on hers which were on my chest.

"..... Ah, s-sorry."





Mafuyu stood up. Her warmth had left me. I sat myself up slowly. Is it because she doesn't want me to see her crying? Mafuyu turned her face away immediately when she noticed my gaze and wiped her tears away from her eyes. She then jumped off the boot of the SUV.

"..... Mama's piano....."

I stood up slowly as she mumbled to herself.

Mafuyu was walking unsteadily on the uneven ground towards the middle of the junkyard. The vision of her back seemed unreal — it felt like she'll disappear under the sunlight in an instant should I turn my eyes away for even the slightest moment.

Mafuyu knelt before the buried piano. She didn't move an inch even after I was standing right behind her. She was trembling.

"..... It will..... no longer play....."

A voice of helplessness.

Music no longer exists here. The magic that was binding us together has disappeared. Scenes of reality have returned to the ends of the world, and the place will welcome yet another seasonal cycle. As time began to tick, Mafuyu and I are the only people at this place.

Therefore, I called out Mafuyu's name.

The kneeling Mafuyu looked up towards me and my outstretched hand.





Her slender fingers entwined themselves with mine. I pulled Mafuyu up. She's standing before me, her sapphire eyes right next to mine.

"..... It's here..... where Mafuyu helped me locate my bass."

I was slowly confirming each and every word.

"You played the song <Blackbird> during the dawn when the rain stopped. Do you still remember?"

Mafuyu looked straight into my eyes and nodded.

"That was the very moment..... when I fell in love with you."

I conveyed my words slowly to Mafuyu, similar to how the rays of the sun transmit their heat to Earth after travelling in a vacuum for a hundred and fifty million kilometers. Her blue eyes looked like they were melting into the ocean. Her pink lips trembled several times as she tried to say something.

"M-Me..... too....."

Mafuyu's face turned red yet again as she said that. Then again, my face was probably as red as hers.

"I was in love with you..... way before that."

"When exactly?" My voice was trembling. What an idiotic question.

"I don't know."

Mafuyu closed her eyes and screamed into my chest.





"Before I realized it, I was already in love with you. A person like you!"

"..... Urm, well, sorry for that."

"Why are you apologizing?"

Mafuyu hammered on my chest a few times, and she even gave me a head-butt. It was actually quite painful, so I lifted my hands in preparation for stopping her—

And before I knew it, I was already hugging Mafuyu tightly on her back and her head.

Her soft hair slipped between my fingers. Mafuyu leaned her cheeks against the shirt on my chest. She could probably hear my heart beating wildly. I knew I was doing something incredible, but I wasn't about to let go.

In the end — Mafuyu circled her arms to my back as well.







"Dummy."

The tearful Mafuyu whispered in my chest.

"I was waiting for you all this time."

"Mmm."

I didn't say the word "sorry". There's nothing else I need to say to Mafuyu. Because she's right here in my arms. I could feel Mafuyu's warmth.

It'll be great if we can be together forever from now on.

We left the valley, hand in hand. As we stepped into the forest, it felt like the place behind us was once again shrouded up by the time-stopping magic. But neither of us turned our heads back.

The air in the forest was moist, as though it were doused by a heavy downpour. It's probably because of Mafuyu's tears. I could hear the chirps of the birds. They should be chatting somewhere in the foliage. Music had returned back to our sides once more.

As we crossed the forest and made our way back to the small pathway between the fields, Mafuyu and I said nothing at all. I was so incredibly happy just from the feeling which came from our tightly entwined hands. I was afraid I'd say something stupid should I speak. Most of my attention was focused on stealing glances at Mafuyu's profile. Mafuyu lowered her head in embarrassment when our eyes meet. She's probably thinking about the same things as well.





The sounds of the orchestra ensemble rang all of the sudden as we were walking down the slope. Mafuyu gave a shriek and pressed her hands onto the small bag that was hanging along her waist. It's an incoming call, Beethoven's <[Piano Concerto no. 2](#)> in B \flat major.

"..... A call? You're not picking it up?"

Mafuyu shook her head.

"It's from Papa, so it's okay."

Really? The ringtone continued playing till it was cut off at the main theme.

"He probably wants me to head back to Tokyo as soon as possible."

"Your schedule's really packed, isn't it?"

"It's okay. I don't want to attend those boring parties anyway."

Mafuyu grabbed my hands once more.

"..... Today, the only thing I want is..... to be together with Naomi."

My heart was beating wildly. There was an urge to run down the slope while pulling Mafuyu along with my hand. I wasn't all too successful in calming my heart down.

"Urm, so, you're having a break now? Till when?"

"I'll be going to Chicago next week."





Said Mafuyu softly with her head lowered. She then suddenly lifted her head to look at me.

"B-But, urm, well, I'll be back again for a week early this May. Also, I'll be in Japan during summer for the recordings. So we can see each other then."

I nodded my head repeatedly and returned Mafuyu's grip with mine.

"Speaking about early May, there are plans for a live concert which we'll be doing for three consecutive days. Will you come down and listen?"

"Live performance?" Mafuyu's eyes were filled with unease when she asked, "..... feketerigó's?"

"Yeah."

As she lifted my hand and placed it before her chest, Mafuyu mumbled,

"..... Chiaki and Kyouko..... are they angry at me?"

"Chiaki's a little angry."

Mafuyu lifted her eyes diagonally to look at me. I laughed and swung her arms about.

"Don't worry, the two girls miss you very much. The band's functioning all this time, and we've even invited some guest performers recently. Do you still remember who Furukawa is? The guitarist with that really fierce look. Remember how he used to say





he won't perform with a band as lousy as ours? He's finally okay with performing with us."

And so, there's no need to worry. Even if we're separated, even if things have changed, even if we've lost something—

There's nothing we can't get back.

"T-Then."

And with that, Mafuyu spoke no more. The slope had reached its end, and we were back to the concrete streets. She finally spoke after we had a brief walk into the residential area.

"U-Urm, I've bought a new guitar."

I looked at Mafuyu in surprise.

"I got to know a person from Fender in California, so I asked him to custom-make one for me."

A custom-made guitar huh, now that's really extravagant. No wait, hold on, guitar? Did she just say the guitar?

"S-So that means—"

"I brought it to our villa. Want to see it?"

"Definitely! N-No wait, I do want to see it, but, urm....."

"It sounded a little stiff. I prefer the sounds from Yuri's guitar. So I hope Naomi can help me with that."

I nodded my head hard.





"Also."

Mafuyu lifted both our hands and stared at our fingers.

"I'm not too sure if my techniques have worsened..... so I hope Chiaki and Kyouko can listen to me play. Is that okay?"

"Of course!" I grabbed onto Mafuyu's hand with both of my own. "Urm, well, wanna show yourself at the studio during our practice? No? Ah, but, urm, for you to show up on stage in May all of the sudden, that's just..... In any case, I'll give Senpai a call—"

"No!" Mafuyu grabbed me by my wrist just as I was about to take out my cellphone. Our eyes meet. She turned her blushing face away slightly.

"Urm, it's not that you can't, but..... let's leave that for later..... for today, all I want....."

Is to be with you..... — I couldn't hear the words which came after that.

The sun was about to set when we reached the station. Past the bus rotary, down the underground flight of stairs and through the ticketing gates.

As we were walking up to the platform, we saw a small grey dot in the middle of the faraway green mountains. We stopped on the last step and gazed silently at the ends of the world, the department store where time stops.





Then all of the sudden, the grey surface burst apart, turning into countless shards that were scattered around the greenish slopes, before making their way towards the blue skies.

It's a flock of birds.

Their formation was changing slowly as they sought the currents to soar into the air. Despite the considerable distance between us and them, it felt like I could hear their cries.

Mafuyu's fingers, which were grabbing onto my right hand, were confirming the presence of the non-existing six strings. Taking cue from the opening G note which had never stopped, Paul McCartney's voice began to extend into the sunset. I could hear nothing, but I knew nonetheless.

Of course, that bird doesn't exist in this country.

The feather which I am holding tightly; the feather which had finally made its way back here will be flying over the oceans once more. Things won't return to the way they used to be.

But even so—

"Hey, Mafuyu."

"..... Yes?"

"Don't ever disappear again."

Mafuyu tightened her grip on my hand in reply.





The illusory six strings which were around had disappeared. The fragments of the song of black bird which were echoing in my heart scattered into the air.

The flock of birds circled the sky and soared towards a place far away amidst the remaining sounds. As I turned my head back, I could still see the tiny shadows of the birds between the horizon and the clear divide of two different shades of blue.

Don't turn back, spread your wings and soar away — I prayed. From the warmth which came through the tight grip on my hand, I knew Mafuyu was making the same wish as me. We leaned against each other, watching in silence as our fragments flew past the oceans and away from us.

-END-





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